THE BRAND PERSONA: OPERATIONALIZING A SYNTHESIS OF BRAND EQUITY
AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

The human brand in social media presents an understudied phenomenon, particularly in the sports domain. The current study focused on sports fans’ perceptions of athlete brands as presented on Twitter. The analysis assessed the rated likeability of athletes based on the social media content attributed to athlete brands. The current study examined this relationship in the context of interacting variables including message tone, group status, and fan identification. Utilizing social identity theory, the overall aim was to understand interaction effects to enhance the ability of scholars and industry practitioners to investigate the phenomenon of human branding in media. Furthermore, the current study intended to expand the brand persona concept to include the social and branding functions represented by humans in media.

The current study utilized an experiment with a survey measure. Participants were presented with stimuli via tweets from athletes. The tweets varied on message tone (positive or negative) and group status (ingroup or outgroup), and respondents were categorized as high-level or low-level fans, resulting in a 2x2x2 design. Results indicated a significant main effect of fan identification level on likeability ratings such that those with higher levels of fan identification were more likely to rate athletes as likeable. There was an interaction effect of fan identification and group status with the positive message condition such that fan identification and group status may influence likeability when tweets are positive.

There was also a significant main effect of message tone on likeability ratings such that those shown positive tweets by athletes were more likely to rate athletes as likeable compared with those shown negative tweets. Finally, results revealed a three-way interaction such that
influence of message tone was potentially greater for those who were exposed to an ingroup tweet, but only among high-level fans. There was a greater difference in likeability ratings between negative and positive conditions for those presented with ingroup tweets, which suggests that tweets from athlete brands may have more impact on high-level fans. Thus, social media posts from athletes of a favorite team or rival team prompt stronger reactions from high-level fans than low-level fans.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to Bubbe Jenny.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

$a$  Cronbach’s index of internal consistency

$F$  F statistic as calculated for an Analysis of Variance

$M$  Mean: the sum of a set of measurements divided by the number of measurements in the set

$N$  Sample size

$p$  Probability associated with the occurrence under the null hypothesis of a value as extreme as or more extreme than the observed value

$SD$  Standard deviation: the value of variation from a mean within a set of data

$+$  Addition (plus)

$-$  Subtraction (minus)

$=$  Equal to
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Social and user-generated media, herein referred to as social media, are increasingly popular in the sports domain, particularly among athletes and fans. Within this media environment, fans’ perceptions of an athlete’s brand image are seldom explored in the literature. To fill this gap, the current study proposes an experiment with a survey measure of sports fans to gauge brand image perceptions of athletes based on their tweets. Brand image is defined by consumers’ perceptions of a brand, which include the brand’s associations, brand’s attributes, or attitudes toward the brand by consumers (Keller, 1993). The current study explores relationships between low-level and high-level fans (i.e., fan identity; Wann & Branscombe, 1993) and relevant manipulations to the experiment, including whether the tweet was produced by a member of a rater’s ingroup (i.e., a favorite team’s athlete) or outgroup (i.e., a rival team’s athlete), or group status, and whether the tweets contain a negative or positive messaging, or message tone. Ultimately, the current study uses ratings of athletes’ likeability based on their social media posts, which may represent fans’ perceptions of athletes’ brand image (Reysen, 2005).

Social media is considered computerized communication technology through online engagement (i.e., the Internet), which includes mobile devices (Kaplan, 2012). In these media environments, users can interact directly and indirectly with themselves and brands (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). A brand is a collection of attributes by which consumers develop a relationship (Keller, 1993). Once these attributes are associated with the brand, the consumer has the ability
to identify a company or organization (Keller, 1993). Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou (2013) suggest a brand image also extends to individuals such as athletes, which logically enacts the term, “fan,” in place of “consumer.” An athlete brand, which specifically pertains to sports media, is a collection of attributes by which relevant stakeholders (e.g., fans) may associate or identify an athlete (Arai, Ko, & Kaplanidou, 2013). The current research advances the aforementioned concepts to explore a highly relevant and growing media space—athlete brand likeability in social media.

The concept of an athlete brand was first explored through endorsements (Melinda & Schumann, 2000), which helped define humans as brands. The human-brand revelation has been a recent subject of scholarly evaluation (Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Hodge & Walker, 2015; Ratten, 2015; Williams, Kim, Walsh, & Choi, 2015). Thomson (2006) describes human brands as any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications. The current study leans on literature that helps establish humans as brands but acknowledges the limited scope by which human brands have been evaluated in the increasingly relevant space of social media and sports. This current study extends the literature on human brands by evaluating the following variables: likeability, fan identity, group status, and message tone.

The impact of research pertaining to fan perceptions and athlete brands in social media potentially extends beyond scholarly application. The current research applies to a growing sports economy. According to Forbes (2015), the sports market in North America is expected to reach $73.5 billion by 2019, which is a projected increase of over 20 percent from 2014. Media rights deals are becoming increasingly larger, which are also projected to surpass gate revenues from stadiums. Stadium revenue is the sports industry’s largest revenue-generating segment to date. Media rights involve contracts that enable media entities to broadcast, market, stream, or
share sporting events. Media rights deals often involve exclusivity contracts where a network becomes the exclusive avenue by which media consumers may view sporting events. For example, a collegiate football conference in the United States may only broadcast or stream on one particular network that has bid and secured media rights.

The sports economy and media viewership are expanding beyond North America. China Daily (2016) reported the following, “In 2013, sports and relevant industries in China reached a total scale of 1.09 trillion yuan ($168.5 billion) and realized an added value of 356.4 billion yuan ($55 billion), accounting for 0.63 percent of GDP in the year, up by 10.8 percent compared to that of 2012, obviously higher than GDP growth in the same period.” The sheer size of China’s sports economy is only a fraction of the world’s overall sports viewership. To put the enormity of the sports industry into perspective, soccer is estimated to have over 4 billion fans, which is over half of the world’s population (TotalSporTek.com, 2016).

A Gallup poll in 2004 determined that 72 percent of 18-29 year-old Americans considered themselves sports fans, which has remained relatively consistent over the past 12 years (Gallup, 2016). When respondents were prompted with questions on a favorite sport to watch, American football remained the most popular sport throughout this period. “60 Minutes”, a popular TV show, partnered with Vanity Fair Magazine for a poll that determined 90 percent of Americans engaged in some form of sports consumption, which was termed “watching sports” (CBSNews.com, 2014). The same poll found that most Americans prefer home viewership of sports compared to live sporting events. Thus, consumption of sports content in social media and live streaming online (Birmingham & David, 2011) will likely increase in the coming years. More notably, the current research explores a topic, sports, that could be considered a ubiquitous element of the American media experience.
The massive sports viewership, particularly among Americans, has resulted in consistent industry growth. For example, Forbes (2014) reported four straight years of royalty revenue among sports franchises that amount to $698 million from retail sales that totaled $12.8 billion. This means media consumers are also purchasing merchandise which amounts to $12.8 billion dollars in retail transactions. Royalties are the fees paid to the trademark owners, which are typically the franchises or institutions (e.g., a college institution) that own the rights to the name brand, logo, or team emblem used on the product. Consistent with the merchandise sales trends, sporting goods (e.g., equipment used to play sports) are also trending upward. Statista (2014) reported sporting goods sales of nearly $64 billion in 2014 and projected the amount to surpass $65 billion in 2015. The impressive size of the sports economy, along with the consistent growth in fans and purchase behavior, indicates an increasingly relevant environment to conduct analyses.

Along with a massive sports economy, the economy of social media branding among athletes is also expanding. This growth signifies an increasingly relevant media space to pursue discovery in sports communications. As of 2015, 65 percent of American adults were engaged in some form of social media (AdWeek.com, 2015). In 2016, Twitter was reported to have 320 million active users with roughly 79 percent of the user community based outside of the United States (Adweek, 2015). Twitter is among the most engaged social media platforms in the world (Meeker, 2014), and has been the focus of numerous studies evaluating athletes’ branding endeavors (Frederick & Clavio, 2015; Han, Dodds, Mahoney, Schoepfer, & Lovich, 2015; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2014). It should be noted that Twitter is potentially overvalued and overemphasized in the scholarly literature due to the precedential nature of scientific discovery and a miscalculation of how many accounts are active (CBSNews.com, 2014). Furthermore,
many journalists and prominent media voices interact on the platform, which may contribute to a
cyclical retweeting and reporting among media entities (Billings, 2014). However, most college-
age respondents recognize Twitter’s platform, and many athletes are engaged in the platform
(Chen, 2015). Thus, Twitter is a fitting platform for respondents of the current analysis (i.e.,
sports fans) to evaluate relationships pertaining to the likeability of posts from athlete brands.

With social media, athlete brands can reach and interact with millions of sports fans
directly (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) operationalized the term, athlete
brand, and defined the concept as “a public persona of an individual athlete who has established
their own symbolic meaning and value using their name, face or other brand elements in the
market” (p. 98). For example, JJ Watt from the Houston Texans of the National Football League
(NFL) has over 3 million followers on Twitter (Statista.com, 2016). Even prominent non-athlete
brands (e.g., Fortune 500 CEOs) are active in social media. MarketWatch.com (2014) reports
that CEOs from 40 of the 50 top Fortune 500 companies listed by Forbes have an active social
media presence, which is up from just 18 CEOs in 2010. Ultimately, social media is an
increasingly relevant space to conduct investigations into branding phenomena, particularly
involving athlete brands and fan opinions.

The current study focuses on opinions from young people, ages 18 to 22, for whom social
media is highly relevant. Pew Research Center (2015) reported 90 percent of U.S. adults from
the ages of 18 to 29 were actively engaged in social media. A recent Statista study (2016)
projects the amount of worldwide social media users will reach 2.5 billion by 2018. With large
communities engaged in social media, spending on branding campaigns continues to rise. In
2016, $7.2 billion were spent on brand marketing in social media, and the spending amount is
projected to increase to $17.34 billion by 2019 (CMO Survey, 2016, Statista.com, 2016). The
projected increase in spending is no surprise considering 36 percent of respondents in a recent Statista survey (2015) reported that social media advertisements had a direct influence on their buying decisions. With millions of stakeholders involved in social media branding phenomena and a growing economy of brand marketing in social media, the current research is highly relevant for both academic and industry discovery.

Among scholarly works there is a growing collection of studies that analyze brands in social media (Armstrong, Delia, & Giardina, 2016; Holt, 2016; Liu & Lopez, 2016), but few have addressed how social media users perceive likeability as it relates to fan identity, group status, and message tone (all components of a perceived brand image from sports fans). As mentioned earlier, Keller (1993) describes brand image as attributes defined through relationships among designated brand(s) and consumers. Brand image also exists as part of a consumer’s recall or memory of the brand. Furthermore, Keller (1993) posits that consumers are considered impressionable to advertisements and other market influences. Nguyen, Melewar, and Chen (2013) define likeability of a brand as a cognition-based perception among consumers, or in the case of sports, a perception among fans. Whether evaluating consumers or fans, likeability is expressed as the positive markers by which a brand provokes a reaction, association, or recall of perceived brand attributes (Keller, 1993). Logically, if brand marketers or communication practitioners of any industry segment have increased understanding of how and why brands portray likeability, their end-goals become more attainable. The current research’s potential for increasing such understanding adds to the study’s relevance and necessity.

In the sports media environment, athlete brands express attributes in social media (Carlson & Donavan, 2013). These attributes are humanistic traits that enable consumers to build relationships with brands. Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) assign the term, *brand persona*, to
define the humanistic traits that may apply to a human brand. When these traits are expressed in social media they may contribute to likeability. Keller and Aaker (1998) introduced the idea that an athlete’s likeability and brand image factors into an overall brand value. As explained by Keller and Aaker (1998) and subsequent brand analyses by the authors, brand value is the quantifiable assessment by which consumers may psychologically, attitudinally, or behaviorally interact with the brand. The current study’s inquiry of fans’ opinions of athlete tweets acknowledges Keller and Aaker’s body of work that helps explain relationships between consumers and brands. Furthermore, the current study contributes to scholarly knowledge by conducting communications research.

Before human brands were assessed in social media studies, a brand was traditionally defined by characteristics marketed by an organization, which would also extend to associations and relationships with consumers (Blackston, Aaker, & Biel, 1993). Hence, many previous brand analyses are void of human branding evaluations, especially in the context of reactions from media consumers. Carlson and Donavan (2013) extended the definition of brands to include individual human athletes, which provides a pathway for the current analysis to consider sports fans (media consumers) as a stakeholder interacting with brands. This means sports fans are viable subjects from which opinions may be obtained to better inform scholars and industry practitioners of sport branding phenomena in social media.

In a competitive marketplace, which includes sports media, brands garner stakeholder positions against rivals. This positioning is called brand equity, which can be measured in wealth (Chase & Brokaw, 2013), popularity (Koo Kim, 1995), endorsement deals (Dean, 1999), social media followership (Andéhn, Kazemia, Lucarelli, & Sevin, 2014), or any other competitive value assessment. The current research focuses on social media followership to help determine
likeability and brand image. Brand equity in simpler terms is defined as the competitive position a brand has in a marketplace. For example, an athlete brand with significant popularity in social media may have more brand equity than their rivals (Keller, 1993). The current study leans on this definition when describing an athlete’s likeability in social media as perceived by sports fans.

Carlson and Donavan (2013) consider high-profile athletes among human brands because they are increasingly visible in media and may become celebrities among fans. The current research refers to Carlson and Donavan’s (2013) notion that human brands to operationalize tests of several brand attributes in social media. Carlson and Donavan (2013) provide a precedent to gauge sports fans’ opinions on human brands in social media. Furthermore, most brand equity studies, particularly pertaining to sports media, do not focus on individual athletes as brands. Instead, they focus on a team brand or sports brand (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005; Biscaia, Ross, Yoshida, Correia, Rosado, & Marôco, 2016; Kerr & Gladden, 2008). The gap in literature may be attributed to the lack of established operationalized concepts to define the human brand.

To advance the literature on human brands a conceptual synthesis of brand equity and social capital is proposed. Social capital represents the idea that social connections and affiliations can provide competitive advantages to certain individuals or groups (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 2000). These advantages are what contribute to ingroup/outgroup ambitions, preferences, or ownership among social actors (Parks-Yancy, DiTomaso, & Post, 2005). In the sports universe, these social actors are often fans (Phua, 2012). The current study factors social competition and the value of a brand among competing entities (i.e., brand equity; Keller, 1993) when assessing a human brand. This approach may increase communication scholars’ ability to assess a brand persona’s salience in media, especially among media consumers like fans. The
conceptual synthesis of social capital and brand equity aims to create more pathways to investigate branding phenomena in various media environments by better establishing the concept of a brand persona. In such an effort, the current study focuses on fan opinions of athlete tweets.

Athlete brands, by nature of their potential celebrity status among fans (Cunningham, 2012), may have considerable social capital (Hunter, Burgers, & Davidsson, 2009). Therefore, factoring both brand equity and social capital enables a more comprehensive assessment of a brand persona’s competitive value. Social networks among fans and followers are what help define an athlete’s brand impact in social media (Phua, 2012), which is one reason why social capital is incorporated into the current analysis. Furthermore, the social networks of fans and followers among fan communities may help determine the competitive position, or brand equity, of the athlete brand and their rivals.

Another significant factor of the current research involving fan perceptions of athlete brands is the media environment selected for analysis. Existing communications literature involving brands is heavily focused on traditional media such as broadcast television, which disseminates sports branding to millions of people (Atkinson, 2002). Understandably, traditional media exports images of human brands too (Bishop, 2003). In social media, clips of broadcasts, reactions to broadcasts, and creative recreations of broadcasts are often generated and shared (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). Some of this content may directly involve athletes and fans. Social media interactions involving sports content contribute to fan relationships (Brown, 2013). This happens as a result of trends and peer networks that expose content to audiences beyond the community directly tied to the subjects of the shared content (Stavros, Meng, Westberg, & Farrelly, 2014).
Communities tied to athlete brands, for example, include fans of the team with which the athlete associates. External communities could be fans of an opposing team or lower-level fans of sports in general. Essentially, there are variances to consider in the relevant communities pertaining to the current study. Thus, the current research specifies aspects to advance discovery of brand attributes as they relate to brand image perceptions by fans. Such aspects include likeability, fan identity, group status, and message tone. Wann and Branscombe (1993) provide a fan identity scale, which the current research adapts to gauge respondents’ fan identity. Respondents are then self-categorized as high-level or low-level fans. After fanfare questions are posed to respondents, an adapted brand image scale from Reysen (2005) is presented to respondents in reaction to athlete tweets. Each tweet presents an ingroup or outgroup status and either a positive or negative message tone.

The concept of an ingroup and outgroup status stems from social identity theory (SIT), which serves as the fundamental theory for advancing an analysis on human branding phenomena in sports media. SIT posits that individuals will compete for social positioning by perceiving social groups that may serve as a catalyst to higher achievement or a rise in social mobility (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Often, social groups can create partisanship and favorability that manifest rivalries, similar to sports team rivals. To further establish the term, brand persona, in the context of competing human brands, the current study draws from SIT. The theory provides definitions of social aspects pertaining to behavior in various environments, which include sports media (Trepte, 2006) and social media (Barker, 2009). Furthermore, Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) study is based in SIT, which helps the current research build upon established framework involving fans. Finally, SIT helps factor fans’ ingroup/outgroup biases,
which may help explain fan identity bias, or other forms of fanfare (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009).

In an experiment with a survey measure, 412 respondents are recruited to participate in a study advancing SIT literature in sports communications. This advancement is partially accomplished by evaluating different levels of fan identity from an adapted scale by Wann and Branscombe (1993). After levels of fan identity are established, the study gauges fans’ reactions to tweets pertaining to likeability. Each tweet portrays one of the following: groups status (either ingroup or outgroup) and message tone (either negative or positive message). The research tests likeability and brand image reactions from an adapted scale by Reysen (2005). The purpose of the research is to advance the literature on branding and sports communications by better establishing critical concepts of human branding phenomena in social media. Such concepts are derived from a conceptual synthesis of brand equity and social capital.

With much of the world engaged in some form of sports viewership, and most Americans considered sports fans, the implications of advancing discovery on the likeability of brand personas and brand image perceptions of fans are potentially profound. Moreover, the economy of sports and social media are expanding at a rate that suggests the current research is long overdue. As expected from this growth, consumer purchases in both environments are also increasing. Along with the market relevance of this study, the theoretical implications of advancing a SIT study on human branding in sports media enables future scholars to explore new avenues of human branding phenomena. Such a research line will help define the universe of branding in media. Furthermore, these studies can include both traditional and new media environments where brand personas interact with consumers.
Finally, quantitative data incorporated into the study supports exploratory research (Chantal, Guay, Dobreva-Martinova & Vallerand, 1996). The current study aims to contribute to the literature in the communications and media domain by evaluating brand perceptions among sports fans in the context of social media, which few studies have orchestrated. The current study also aims to contribute to recent advances in social media studies pertaining to sports (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2012; Santomier, 2008). Moreover, survey data in the current study is meant to create a deeper understanding of potential relationships between high-level and low-level fans respective to different values presented in social media from athlete brands (positive/negative tweets and ingroup/outgroup status). In doing so, the universe of social media studies in the sports domain will have more explanatory power of branding phenomena.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study draws from social identity theory (SIT) and extends the literature on fan identity by investigating perceptions of athletes’ brands in social media. This is accomplished by better defining the universe of athlete brands in social media through a conceptual synthesis of brand equity and social capital. SIT’s conceptual categories, social mobility and social competition (Haslam et al., 2010), provide an applicable framework to organize concepts that describe the value of a human brand in a competitive marketplace (i.e., brand equity). Social mobility and social competition also describe a socially competitive value garnered from marketplace interactions (i.e., social capital). These conceptual categories are explained in further detail after an overview of SIT’s application to the overarching question of the current study: “How are athletes’ brand value in social media perceived?”

Overview of Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory stems from early works by Tajfel and Turner (1979; 1986) who suggest people belong to social groups that may interact in a broader societal construct. In doing so, individuals may set goals to rise above their existing social boundaries (Ellemers, Van Knippenberg, De Vries, & Wilke, 1988). Ashforth and Mael (1989) explain that social boundaries are often defined by groups, which prompt members of such groups to experience an identity-association psychologically or interactively. Brown (2000) refers to this identity construct among people who belong to groups as ingroup bias. In contrast to ingroups, Hogg (2001) defines outgroups as a person’s propensity to “perceive others not as unique individuals
but through the lens of features that define relevant … outgroup membership (i.e., perceptual depersonalization of others …)” (p. 186). In other words, people tend to perceive others as prototypes of groups, which may apply to both ingroups and outgroups. As Hogg (2001) explains, these “prototypes are context specific, multidimensional fuzzy sets of attributes that define and prescribe attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that characterize one group and distinguish it from other groups” (p. 187). In simpler terms, outgroups are driven by perceived, separate stereotypes a person assigns to others based on social factors. In some circumstances, an individual or multiple individuals may acknowledge an outgroup and draw distinctions in their mind about its members, and then aim or desire to join the group. This phenomenon occurs when the outgroup is contextually perceived to offer more self-worth or social rewards (e.g., societal standing) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Brewer (1984) suggests the notion of groups within societies and their competitive social assets—also referred to as capital—traces back to Marx’s writing on class, society, labor, and power constructs (Lin, 1999). This approach to observing and defining social phenomena and social artifacts (Gary, 2005) is considered part of the collectivist perspective (Poznanski, 2001). Marxist collectivism evolved from an assumption that people associate with mass societies, whether political or economic-social marketplaces (Hayek, 1937). The literature progressed to include a more individualistic pursuit involving new behavioral dimensions of social ambition (Schwartz, 1994), otherwise referred to as individualism (Hodgson, 1986).

As individualism gained traction in the 20th century, the legacy of collectivism remained rooted in the practice of evaluating societies through intergroup dynamics relative to individual well-being and status (Hogg & Williams, 2000).
The body of literature that grew over the next hundred years after Marx’s seminal works focused less on the collective-ethic, which coincided with increased debates about the mechanics and feasibility of individual pursuits of upward mobility. Scholars began to explore an individual’s role within a group’s status (i.e., class position) (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). This led to an explicit acknowledgment of social mobility and social competition, which is further defined in this chapter.

The individualism discourse introduced topics that contributed to SIT’s conceptual categories of social mobility and social competition such as self-esteem (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). This introspective viewpoint of an individual’s motive to interact with groups, whether their own or others, has provided strong explanatory power (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). However, explorations of social mobility and social competition have drawn criticism for potential misdiagnoses for motivations behind discrimination among individuals interacting with external groups (e.g., an individual mistreating a group considered lower class) (Brown, 2000). SIT has been further complicated by criticisms that its empirical predictive power is low unless provided significant time to test broader contextual factors to validate qualitative analyses (Hogg & Williams, 2000; Rubin & Hewstone, 1998). This critique should be considered in light of outlined limitations posited by the theory’s founders, Turner (1999) and Tajfel (1984), who suggested any tests based in SIT should be supported with strong contextual definitions; whereby, any social segment—whether a group, multiple groups, or individual—and any variations interacting among these societal segments (Hogg, 2001), would be pursued with extensive understanding of the social context explored.
Social Mobility

Social mobility is considered an evolutionary aspect of social interaction, which can be determined by the psychological status of an individual’s group membership (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995) or a byproduct of an individual’s reflection and calibrated behavior among interacting social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As explained by Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, and Hodge (1996), of the strategies offered by Tajfel and Turner (1986), one in particular deals with individualism—social mobility. “The objective of individual strategies is to enhance the individual's identity without necessarily changing the status of the ingroup as a whole. Individual strategies include both actual and psychological attempts to achieve positive social identity” (p. 241). An ingroup refers to an individual’s existing social group to which they have an association, or membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Individual strategies may include leaving an ingroup to join another group that yields a more positive social identity.

Sports presents a social category (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995) where SIT functions to “be more useful in exploring intergroup dimensions and in specifying the sociocognitive generative details of identity dynamics” (p. 255). The current study helps define the micro-sociological underpinnings (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995) of cognitive processes that may take place among individual actors and group dynamics. Of course, there are limitations to what perceptions may reveal regarding cognition. However, study results may serve as a precursor to future research that dives deeper into what psychological activities exist among individuals involved in intergroup relations in sports, particularly involving social mobility. This potential research line assumes SIT would be employed as a theoretical basis for future investigations in this domain. To provide such a pathway for future analyses, the current study factors social
mobility among human brands by evaluating a specific community (sports fans) who engage an increasingly relevant and popular media environment—social media.

**Media and Social Mobility**

In social media, an account (i.e., a public profile) may be represented by an individual athlete, which portrays the human brand of the athlete (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010). The athlete’s popularity may fluctuate from various factors (e.g., on-field performance, an amount of traditional media coverage, and off-field behavior), but may also be impacted by their social media activity (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). Furthermore, an increase in followers may indicate more brand value (Hoffman & Fodor, 2010); whereby, social mobility for athletes is exercised, in part, by increasing an online presence through social media engagement (Hambrick et al, 2010). Before social mobility could be assessed in social media, researchers focused on traditional sports media environments, which include television, magazines, and radio (Wong & Trumper, 2002).

Examples of scholarly work in the sports domain that assesses social mobility in traditional media environments include Taylor and Doria (1981), a study that analyzed athletes who take blame for team losses. Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (1997) demonstrated that athletes remain with a losing team, even when presented with opportunities to join winners. In both studies, results indicate that such calculated decisions raise athletes’ profile and influence audiences’ perceptions. “Audiences” in these studies feasibly include sports fans who consume sports media. Thus, the aforementioned studies serve to bolster SIT’s application to an analysis of this target community. Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje (2002) refer to the results of these studies as part of social circumstances that are malleable based on the behavior of social actors (Unruh,
1979) and the socially constructed elements that enable individuals to aspire within interrelated groups. Furthermore, Ellemers et al. (2002) review such studies with the conclusion that SIT is an applicable theory to explore “the interaction of social identity as a perceiver factor implicating different aspects of the self (or different social selves), and social contextual factors that either enhance or diminish the meaningfulness of personal as well as social identities” (p. 163).

**Social Competition**

SIT’s founders, Tajfel and Turner (1979), inspired literature that mapped out strategies for individuals to improve ingroup evaluations or manage disadvantaged group perceptions (i.e., the intention of improving one’s social status). Ellemers, Wilke, and van Knippenberg (1993) explain that intergroup relations have structural characteristics which may help determine ingroup identification. This can also be interpreted as how much an individual has pride or perceived legitimacy toward their group, or another behavioral or cognitive characteristic in association with their group. Several studies explicitly mention social competition and social mobility as mechanisms for coping with an unsatisfactory state of an individual’s group status (Blanz, Mummendey, Mielke, & Klink, 1998; Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999). Mummendey et al., (1999) refer to social competition as an intention to gain the status level of a competing group or reverse the status relation by claiming ingroup superiority. The authors further define social competition as part of collective behavior, which is often portrayed or socially enacted by individual leaders. Through a test of behavioral responses to inferior and unsatisfying ingroup positions, Mummendey et al., (1999) employed a SIT model with “sociostructural characteristics as predictors, identification as a mediator, and identity
management strategies as criteria” (p. 231). Results indicate that characteristics such as legitimacy and resentment from an individual’s perception of another group inspire social competition.

Hogg (2006) explains that social competition by individuals or groups is influenced, in large part, by beliefs toward their own group and external groups. Thus, perceptions of one’s social self and other social actors within a social environment are relevant elements to explore, which the current study pursues. Turner (1975) was conceivably so compelled by the potential salience of social competition that it was posited as a theory. This is, perhaps, understandable considering an objective observer could feasibly render social competition as an apparent phenomenon, especially in sports. As evidence, Turner (1975) has been cited over 1,100 times (scholar.google.com, 2016). However, few scholars have referred to social competition as a theory, which has rendered it tethered to SIT as a conceptual category among multiple others (including social mobility). This presents an opportunity for contribution to the conceptual categories of social mobility and social competition, which are offered later in this chapter in a conceptual synthesis of brand equity and social capital. The proposed conceptual synthesis aims to better define the universe of brand perceptions of athletes in sports media.

Scholarly research pertaining to athletes and social competition in terms of social identity include Krane and Barber (2003), who suggest social identity contributes to social competition by creating competitiveness among athletes or social groups for positive social identity. Conversely, Auerbach (2005) describes positive brand endorsement value with “bad boy” images among athletes. In what might help explain the competing perspectives, Dietz-Uhler, End, Demakakos, Dickirson, and Grantz (2002) tested sports fans to determine how they reconciled positive team associations with off-field deviance from a specific athlete. Two distinct reactions
occurred: (1) an ingroup bias was formed, which maintained an allegiance and defense of the athlete; and (2) a dichotomous “black sheep” effect took place, which rendered the identity of the athlete as separate and unrepresentative of the group to which the fan has an allegiance.

Social competition is present among social groups, especially in the sports domain. In collegiate sports, group rivalries are heightened through three noteworthy social circumstances: (1) media narratives (Kian, Vincent, & Mondello, 2008); (2) contrived brand portrayals of both negative and positive characteristics (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1991); and (3) various reactions from sports fans to on-field behavior of athletes (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). Fink et al., (2009) suggest group dynamics in the sports domain, especially when factoring media’s involvement with fan reactions, are observable when based in SIT. Furthermore, SIT’s social competition contributes to the conceptual framework by which sports media scholars may quantitatively and qualitatively evaluate individuals and groups interacting in a complex media environment online.

Social Media and Social Competition

In social media, quantifiable figures are portrayed to demonstrate the number of followers an individual has garnered (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). An athlete’s followership could be measurably competitive against another athlete. Similarly, a team’s branded account in social media (Ballouli & Hutchinson, 2010), could compete for followership numbers against relevant groups. Essentially, social media is a competitive landscape with transferrable competitive characteristics from the sports environment where athletes compete on-field. Social competition may play out through online discourse where sports fans, athletes, teams, and other parties engage on “hot-button” issues (Clavio & Zimmerman, 2012).
The multi-channel communication of social media (Verhoef, Kannan, & Inman, 2015) forms an interweb of communication in a seemingly chaotic social phenomenon (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). Inevitably, social competition will formulate in these exchanges with groups interacting in the sports domain. The current study considers this possibility through an evaluation of brand perceptions among sports fans. In doing so, future scholars may decode online communication to understand communicative motives; intentional or unintentional branding efforts; social media branding campaigns by athletes; on-field and off-field behavioral correlations with online branding by athletes; and the cognitive and social processes of individuals engaged in social competition.

**Relevant Studies in Social Identity Theory**

Among the many developments of SIT literature, several studies have focused heavily on the intersection of sports, fans, athletes, and media. In doing so, these studies have acknowledged the social attributes of individuals and their fans or bystanders who may be exposed to sports media. Underwood, Bond, and Baer (2001) offer one of the most precedential studies for advancing analyses of brands in the sports domain. By identifying brand attributes (McDaniel, 1999), the authors create a pathway by which human brands could be observed. Furthermore, they incorporate social identity theory to advance their study. Similarly, Heere and James (2007) present a measurable scale for how team identities interact, which is a transferrable approach to how human brands could be assessed. Other examples in the sports media domain where social identity theory provides the theoretical basis to advance evaluations include Carlson, Donavan, and Cumiskey (2009) and Madrigal (2000). These studies explore brand attributes in a social context of the sports media marketplace with identifiers that are distinctly human. The precedent of applying humanistic brand attributes to organizations and customers’ reactions (i.e., sports
fans’ reactions) create logical and intuitive pathways to include human brands in the current analysis.

SIT studies in the sports media domain often focus on fan reactions (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009) and interactions (Van Leeuwen, Quick, & Daniel, 2002) with sports teams (Madrigal, 2000) or events (i.e., endorsements) (Carlson & Donavan, 2008). Recently, a few investigations have focused on social identity constructs and athletes in the context of social media (Sanderson, 2012; Sanderson, 2013). This development serves as an acknowledgment that social media offers a uniquely suitable environment to investigate human brands and their interactions pertaining to social mobility and social competition. Through an analysis of online gaming (i.e., computer modulated games), Vorderer, Hartmann, and Klimmt (2003), provide an early example of how studies could incorporate social competition in the theoretical framework of individuals interacting online. Carlson and Donavan (2013) offer a recent and important scholarly analysis of how human brands exist in sports and media. This article serves as a lynchpin for eventually measuring the value of a human brand in the context of social media, whether in sports or another domain. To accomplish such investigations, value assessments must lean on an existing concept, like brand equity, which offers an operationalizable and measurable precedent to evaluate brand attributes in the current study.

**Brand Equity**

Brand equity is a term used to define the value of a certain brand (Keller, 1993). The term is most attributed to marketing researchers, Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993), who argue the value of a brand is assessed by the market share a company or organization has among its competitors. This market share would then be a result of the brand’s competitiveness (Aaker, 1992). Aaker (1991) identified five important aspects encompassing brand equity: brand loyalty, name
awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and proprietary brand assets. Keller (1993) focused on two important aspects: brand awareness and brand image. Keller’s (1993) aspects of brand equity formed the basis of the customer-based brand equity model, which is the most widely utilized and cited model to evaluate brand equity. The current study’s use of Reysen’s (2005) brand image scale model is part of the customer-based brand equity model lineage.

When considering an athlete’s individualism in a branding environment like sports media, brand equity (Keller, 1993) offers a useful, related concept—value. This term is often referred to as brand value to signify a measurable factor that assesses market attitudes (Aaker & Jacobson, 2001; Doyle, 2001), consumer awareness (Ha, 2004; Oh, 2000), or reputation (Cable & Turban, 2003), which is also referred to as brand image (Arai, Ki, & Ross, 2014). In the case of an individual athlete building a reputation, whether in social media or another media environment, sports fans who associate with the same team as the athlete, or are part of a rival team association, are considered relevant stakeholders. In communications literature, these stakeholders may be considered an engaged audience of various degrees (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2012).

Keller (1993) suggests value in any reputation-building strategy may have a financial outcome, which may impact brand value. In the case of an athlete, a financial outcome could correlate with a draft position on a professional sports team or a contract to play with a team. Brand equity literature suggests an organization has a brand (Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2000) and brands have measurable value (Keller, Parameswaran, & Jacob, 2011) that rise or fall depending on public relations, advertising, or marketing campaigns executed on their behalf (Biel, 1993). This value assessment can also apply to a human brand, which has been tested and substantiated through assessments of “star” appeal, or celebrity endorsement (Agrawal &
Kamakura, 1995; DeSarbo & Harshman, 1985; Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011; Knittel & Stango, 2013; Spry, Pappu, & Bettina Cornwell, 2011, Yu, 2005). The current study aims to add the definition of a human brand by extending the literature to the sports media domain where brand equity of an athlete factors social media.

**Brand Intention**

Online viewership in social media is measured through *impressions*, which is defined as the placement of posts or promotional content on a viewer’s screen (Muthuswamy & Ramamurthy, 2006). Leaning on Agrawal and Kamakura’s (1995) assessment that promotions by brands have a positive financial yield, this study considers such gains could also be achieved through increased impressions online from intentional behavior by the brands. Sports fans are considered to favor brands for which they have an affinity or follow, which often involves perceiving more favorable attributes of the brand (O’Reilly & Braedley, 2008). This is an important development from literature to understand group status among sports fans. Moreover, brand intention could only be possible with human involvement, which further validates a study on human brands. To evaluate a human brand in any context, the social aspects of a human brand must be defined. The current study addresses this challenge with a conceptual synthesis of brand equity and social capital.

The conceptual synthesis of brand equity and social capital enables future studies to potentially measure brand personas’ social interactivity, online relationships, and value assessments. These potential developments are projected based on social media studies that indicate a rise in a social benefit for those who intentionally engage social media sites for such purposes (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001). Therefore, the current study considers sports fans’ to intentionally engage social media, which prompts a reasonable
assumption that athletes do the same. Furthermore, athletes have an incentive to engage social media due to increased promotional value, which may increase their financial worth, or brand equity (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995).

**Customer-Based Brand Equity Model**

Keller (1993) defined the customer-based brand equity model (CBBE) as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand” (p. 8). This definition has three parts that Keller (1993) further outlines: differential effect (i.e. the effect attributable to the brand alone), consumer response (i.e. changes in brand perception or preference), and brand knowledge. Brand knowledge is the memory associations a consumer has with a brand, which has two key dimensions: brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness refers to the ability of a consumer to remember (recall) the brand, and the ability of a consumer to recognize a brand after prior exposure (Bettman, 1979; Percy & Rossiter, 1992).

Brand image refers to the consumer perception of a brand, such as the brand associations held in consumer memory. Keller (1993) describes several different categories of brand associations that contribute to the brand image: (1) the type, which could be the consumer associated benefits or value consumers attach to the product; (2) attributes, which can be described as brand features; or (3) attitudes, which contributes to overall brand evaluation about the product or service. Other categories that contribute to brand image include brand favorability, the brand’s strength, and the uniqueness of brand associations.

Using the CBBE, researchers can determine the positive or negative customer reactions to marketing efforts that are attributable the brand alone. Tong and Hawley (2009), for example, evaluate the positive and negative effects of sportswear brands marketed in the Chinese consumer space. In the same market (China), Bodet and Chanavat (2010), incorporate the CBBE
framework to evaluate sports branding in the country. Biscaia, Correia, Ross, Rosado, and Marôco (2013) broaden the model’s application by evaluating an entire sport (soccer) to understand spectator-fan relationships. Other examples of CBBE’s framework applied to sports evaluations include events (Lee, Bass, & Kim, 2010), which often involve a movement in brand value, like a stock price fluctuation as a result of an endorsement. In the context of an athlete’s brand, such an event may be the player’s performance on the field or on the court. Often, an event could also apply to an athlete’s behavior, which is tied to their brand personality.

**Brand Personality**

In addition to associating brands with non-human attributes such as the price, packaging, or the perceived benefits of using the brand, consumers can also associate brands with human traits (Pendergast, 1993; Plummer, 1985). Brands can benefit from this, as brands associated with human traits can facilitate a larger brand preference than those associated with strictly non-human traits (Malhotra, 1988). The set of human traits associated with a brand is known as the brand personality. Brand personality can be incorporated as a part of the brand image dimension from the CBBE (Pappu, Quester, & Cooksey, 2005).

Aaker (1997) outlined an organized approach for explaining how a brand could exemplify, represent, or associate with human personality traits. The explanation includes five core dimensions of brand personality, which are sincerity (honest, down-to-earth), excitement (daring, imaginative), competence (reliable, intelligent), sophistication (upper class, charming), and ruggedness (outdoorsy, tough). These dimensions are applicable to American consumers only and will differ across cultures (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001). Aaker’s approach to defining brands leans on human, societal concepts, which enables studies to incorporate this framework into social evaluations (Bosnjak, Bochmann, & Hufschmidt, 2007).
This approach has prompted scholarly work in the sports domain, which is exemplified by Ross (2008) who developed a brand personality scale pertaining to team sports. As previously suggested, scholarly work incorporating human aspects of brands in team sports evaluations often provides transferrable concepts, scales, and models to human brands. Ross (2008) is no exception. As mentioned previously in the current analysis, Carlson and Donavan (2013), in their pivotal study on human brands, provide an example of where this transferability is actualized.

**Social Identity-Brand Equity Model**

While having a positive brand personality can provide meaningful benefits, even greater positive outcomes can be achieved if brands can incorporate social identity (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001). This brand strategy can foster a strong emotional connection between customers and the brand, while prompting fervent commitment from the customer toward the brand. An example of where this strategy may apply is sports marketplace, where the consumers are the fans and the product is typically the team or athlete (Simmers, Damron-Martinez, & Haytko, 2009). Cialdini et al. (1976), in their well-cited study, showed that fans equate their personal successes with the successes of their team. The reverse is also true, where fans equate their personal failures with the failures of their team (Schafer, 1969). Thus, fans can get their sense of identity by their associations with a team.

Underwood et al. (2001) were among the first researchers to develop a connection between social identity and brand equity. They attempted to connect SIT with the customer-brand equity model, and argued that the better a brand (team or athlete) is included in the customers’ (fans’) identity, then the greater the brand equity. This outcome is one of the justifications for the hypotheses included in the current study, which link likeability with positive messages and ingroups (explained later in the chapter). Underwood et al. (2001) identified four
features of the sports marketplace that contribute to social identity: (1) the group experience; (2) the history and tradition; (3) the physical facility; and (4) the rituals. The group experience relates to the social interaction and social cohesion of sporting events. This social experience differentiates fans from mere spectators (Zillman & Paulus, 1993). History and tradition contribute to social identity because, as Underwood et al. (2001) stated, “it connotes a sense of tangibility in a largely intangible environment” (p. 6). The physical facility brings fans together, while the rituals reinforce the history and tradition.

Boyle and Magnusson (2007) used the social identity-brand equity model to investigate influences on brand equity of a collegiate athletic program. The study focused on the effects of group experience, history, and the physical facility. The authors found that social identity did indeed have a positive effect on brand equity, which also serves as justification for the current study’s approach to constructing hypotheses (explained later in the chapter). Watkins (2014) performed a similar study to Boyle and Magnusson (2007) and surveyed fans of six National Basketball Association (NBA) teams. The study found that social identity had a positive effect on brand equity, and that group experience was the most important factor influencing social identity. The aforementioned studies are relevant to the current study because they introduce social and human aspects of branding in the sports arena while substantiating hypotheses that predict likeability with positive message tone and ingroup status.

**Capital: Economic, Cultural, and Social**

Brands in sports, as represented by athletes, are inherently human, and are measurable and observable in a social context. The term, capital, with application to social contexts (social capital) and financial markets, is incorporated into the theoretical framework of this study to draw in the aforementioned SIBE studies to the human brand evaluation. In doing so, social
identity and brand equity become more defined in the human experience, rather than just organizational brands. Capital can be defined as the accumulated resources of an individual or corporation (Dunn & Holtz-Eakin, 1996) that factor societal framework and artifacts (Sparks, 1996). Arguably the most widely known form of capital is economic capital, which is measurable among broad societal analyses (Bourdieu, 1986) or individual experiences of classism and economic position (Bourdieu, 1983b). Wealth and resources are often included in assessments of economic capital. Cultural capital describes the distinguishing signifiers of groups-societies that can be sourced through lineage, language, emblems, institutions, and other artifacts of society (Sparks, 1996). Social capital, which serves as a tenet of the current study’s theoretical basis, refers to the interactions among people and societies that result in a competitive position within a field (i.e., a society with a measurable outcome like class position) (Bourdieu, 1989).

Bourdieu (1986, 1983a) defined capital as “accumulated labor” (p. 241), though not all labor is equal. This was demonstrated by the pioneering works of Mincer, Becker, and Schultz, who between their seminal papers on the subject have nearly 20,000 citations (Becker, 1962; Mincer, 1958; Schultz, 1961). Social capital was first conceived in the context of labor, which involved social actors (people) who were non-homogeneous in their labor abilities (Bourdieu, 1987). Logically, a healthy laborer could provide more economic value than an unhealthy laborer, which would result in earnings that could be maintained (i.e., the laborer would not lose their job due to poor work performance). This simple observation of competitive positions could also apply to different levels of education and skills among labor. The economic value of a laborer’s abilities translates into social capital if their workplace position merits leadership (management). Similarly, high earnings among a laborer would garner more social capital when
compared to laborers who earn less. Other attributes that factor into social capital may include accumulated health, education, habits, skills, training, and personality attributes of individuals (Coleman, 1988).

**Spotlight on Cultural Capital**

Among the current study’s aims is to better establish a brand persona as a measurable and observable entity in media analyses. Thus, there is an acknowledgment that a human brand’s cultural elements inform its social elements. Cultural capital is explained in the current study to better contextualize how social capital is factored into a conceptual synthesis with brand equity, which better define a human brand in a competitive field (e.g., the sports media environment) (Bourdieu, 1978). Cultural capital is similar to social capital regarding complimentary possession of resources that could be accessible to others (i.e., enrollment in the same university as others) (Bourdieu, 1989), and is either shared (i.e., shared sports team identity) (Bourdieu, 1978) or appropriated to a finite number of competing players (i.e., highest grade earned in a course) (Bourdieu, 1969). Cultural capital is the accumulated knowledge, skills, and behaviors that demonstrate cultural competence and social standing (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). For example, 90% of Fortune 500 chief executive officers (CEOs) play golf (Dosh, 2016). Therefore, to demonstrate cultural competence and social standing indicative of a Fortune 500 CEO, an individual must play golf and do so both often and well (Dosh, 2016).

Bourdieu (1986) described cultural capital as having three forms: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state. The embodied state refers to the cultural knowledge accumulated through education and social interactions. For example, how to dress appropriately or basic manners. The objectified state refers to accumulated objects that demonstrate how much cultural capital an individual has. This includes items such as expensive
clothes, expensive cars, or paintings. The institutionalized state refers to how cultural capital is objectively valued. A prime example of this is an academic degree, such as a Doctor of Medicine (MD) degree. Lamont and Lareau (1988) provided insight on Bourdieu’s definition of cultural capital. The authors argued that cultural capital is best explained as a “basis for exclusion” (p. 156). Those who have a higher social origin have advantages over those of lower social origin and use cultural capital to defend against upward social mobility.

**Spotlight on Social Capital**

Our world, as it pertains to human existence, is inherently social (Archer, 2007). Humans create multiple social connections as they age, which may include groups such as family, classmates, colleagues, clubs, societies, and other groups (Fine & Harrington, 2004). Social capital represents the idea that social connections can provide competitive advantages to certain individuals or groups (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 2000). For example, an athlete may extend a financial loan to a teammate on the basis the borrower must repay the loan or face ostracism from the team. However, it is not a given that an individual or group will possess social connections, because such relationships may take a considerable investment of economic capital and cultural capital to formulate (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes, 2000).

The social capital available from social connections (or a network) will depend on both the network size and the quality of each connection. A higher quality connection would be a connection with which one interacts more frequently and fosters more trust, support, and closeness (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). A higher quality connection would provide more social capital. A lower quality connection is akin to “a friend of a friend”. A lower quality connection may not provide significant social capital relative to a higher quality connection, but they can increase the size of a social network. Putnam (2001) distinguished between what he
called “bonding” and “bridging” connections. Bonding connections are the higher quality connections and can be exclusive to members of a group. Bridging connections are the lower quality connections but can form a bridge between exclusive social groups.

Social network sites (SNS), which are broadly referred to as social media in the current study, such as Twitter, foster social interactions among social connections in a web-based platform (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Despite studies in the early 2000s showing mixed results between Internet/computer-mediated interactions and social capital (Hampton & Wellman, 2003; Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin, & Reese, 2005; Nie, 2001; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001), studies have evolved to reveal positive correlations between SNS and social capital. For example, Ellison et al. (2007) found social capital maintenance and creation was correlated with SNS among Michigan State University undergraduate students. Burke, Kraut, and Marlow (2011) found that increases in bridging connections were associated with receiving SNS messages. This is supported by Ellison et al. (2014), which demonstrated that active engagement with connections on SNS correlates with increases in bridged connections.

Putnam (1995) offers a prominent and frequently cited example of how social capital is incorporated into macro-evaluations of society, which may include sports. Clopton and Finch (2010) refer to Putnam (1995) in an analysis of college students and their level of team identification to determine implications on social capital. The results indicated that college students had higher levels of social capital with higher levels of team identification as sports fans. Another sports-related study that incorporates social capital to explain social interactions among people includes Skinner, Zakus, and Cowell (2008). This study focuses heavily on sports and society through an evaluation of how social capital is built by introducing and supporting sports programs in communities with historically low-class status. The key takeaway, as it relates
to the current study, is that social capital can be applied to communities of all ranges, especially in the sports domain. Furthermore, social capital analyses apply to social media evaluations (Phua, 2012), which can incorporate sports’ inherently social competitive dynamics (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008) to determine various causes and elements of social capital among all stakeholders of the environment.

There have been significant advancements of social media literature that explores social capital, particularly in the sports domain. Houlihan and Malcolm (2015) posit that to understand sports, scholars must understand the media environments with which sports interact, which include social media. The authors suggest sports can have a direct impact on social capital for any stakeholder associated with a team or league, which can have extended influence to governments and nation-states. In other words, social capital can be obtained and observed from a macro-societal level (nations) to a micro-societal level (an individual). Hoye, Smith, Nicholson, and Stewart (2015) explain how social media has become an opportunistic environment to implement intentional branding strategy for sports teams and athletes. The authors explain how intentional branding can lead to increased social capital, which then helps teams and athletes expand social networks.

Mahan, Seo, Jordan, and Funk (2015) focused on the micro-perspective of social capital by evaluating how individuals increase motivation, wellbeing, and performance by engaging social media related to exercise. In their study, sports (running) was the independent variable, and social media was evaluated for its potential impact on behavior. Social capital was considered as part of the theoretical construct by which an individual would gain benefits from engaging in social media, which would then translate to sports activity. While the current study takes a broader, more macro-perspective to investigate sports and branding, it should be noted
that social capital, social media, and sports are familiar elements of analysis in communication science, particularly recently (Chen, Wang, Wegner, Gong, Fang, & Kaljee, 2015; Cleland & Cashmore, 2016; Sloan, Morgan, Burnap, & Williams, 2015).

A Synthesis of Brand Equity and Social Capital

There are few studies evaluating brand equity—a concept measuring market value, or competitive brand value (Keller, 1993)—incorporating the social aspects of a human brand (Sussan, 2013). The current study proposes a conceptual synthesis of brand equity with social capital (Bourdieu, 1983b), which describes the competing resources and relationships utilized to gain power, leverage, or advantage in a competitive environment. The conceptual synthesis of brand equity with social capital enables the current study to operationalize an investigation of specific attributes potentially impacting fan perceptions of human brands, or brand personas (athletes).

This proposed conceptual synthesis aims to better categorize the conceptual overlap pertaining to brand personas in social media. While this study leans more on brand equity to operationalize an analysis of social media users’ opinions on brand personas, social capital helps define the universe of brand personas interacting in online social environments. Furthermore, the incorporation of the concept, social capital, into the study’s theoretical approach helps calculate how social interactivity and perceptions by followers may translate into branding power (Chiagouris & Wansley, 2000; Rein & Shields, 2007). This section also addresses areas of synthesis that are necessary for explaining how brand personas compete and delineate success among competitors.

Brand equity literature explains that a brand persona may have attributes that resemble human qualities or represent actual individuals (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010; Petromilli &
Michalczynk, 1999; Wee, 2004). Social capital literature that explores social media describes individuals engaged in the online environment, or social field, as social actors (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Thus, a brand persona in social media is a social actor interacting in a social field. Social capital literature suggests that as social actors interact online, power dynamics and relationships emerge (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). These relationships are defined in social capital analyses by the attributes associated with an individual, which may be measured in influence (Wasko & Faraj, 2005) or economic resources (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). These attributes are what brand equity literature refers to as brand attributes (Wood, 2000).

In brand equity literature, the collection of attributes that fans, followers, customers, or other external stakeholders associate with a brand (Keller, 1993), or recall about a brand (Aaker, 1996), are termed brand image (Biel, 1992; Faircloth, Capella, & Alford, 2001). Therefore, a brand persona in social media is represented by a brand image and has brand attributes that fans and followers may recall after exposure to the brand. As brand equity literature explains, a brand persona in social media may also have brand associations (O’Shaughnessy & O’Shaughnessy, 2000), which is the affiliation of another brand that either validates the brand (Aaker & Keller, 1990) or causes a change in brand value in the mind of the consumer (Keller, 1999).

Examples of brand associations include a celebrity endorsing a product (Spry, Pappu, & Bettina Cornwell, 2011). In this case, the celebrity has a brand persona that associates with the product brand. In doing so, an attitudinal or behavioral change may take place among audiences who are exposed to the celebrity endorsement. Attitudinal changes may involve an improved reputation (Foreman & Argenti, 2005; Selnes, 1993). Behavioral changes may involve purchases of the product endorsed (Morris & Boone, 1998).
Studies incorporating brand equity measure these changes through event analyses, which are defined as changes in the value of the brand(s) evaluated (Keller, 2002; Henson & Mazzocchi, 2002; Wiles & Danielova, 2009). In the context of individual athletes and collegiate sports, events may increase or decrease the brand equity of the brand persona, which represents the market share or competitive position of the brand (Keller, 1993; Wood, 2000). In other words, if a brand persona were the only online marketing campaign for a product aimed at a target demographic, and the brand persona dominated the fanfare and followership of the target demographic in social media, the brand persona would have a dominant brand equity position. Explained further in a sports context, if an athlete had an extraordinary performance shown on various media, this would be an event that could cause a change to the brand persona’s competitive value position among rivals.

Brand equity directly relates to social capital, which is categorized into two elements: (1) social or organizational relationships (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998); and (2) amount or quality of resources (Portes, 2000). The concept of brand equity includes a brand’s relationship with the marketplace (Duncan & Moriarty, 1997; Kim, Choi, Qualls, & Han, 2008) and a brand’s quality offering, or perception of quality, by active and potential stakeholders (Keller, 1993). Social capital is described by Portes (2000) in the statement, “[T]hrough social capital, actors can gain direct access to economic resources” (p. 45). Thus, through increases in brand equity or social capital, economic and social assessments are possible. This is, perhaps, the most consequential theoretical point offered in this conceptual synthesis, because future studies may evaluate the social interactivity and relationships pertaining to brand personas online or any media environment with economic and social analyses.
Brand Persona

Utilizing the brand personality framework put forth by Aaker and Fournier (1995), Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) combined the concepts of brand equity and social capital into what they called a brand persona. The authors described the brand persona as the articulated brand character and brand personality. The brand persona may appear human, as it will have a brand personality, but Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) argued it can also be a person or an entity with humanistic attributes. Examples include a brand icon, such as the Green Giant, or a brand spokesperson, like Colonel Sanders. A brand is traditionally defined by characteristics marketed by an organization, which may also extend to associations and relationships with customers (Blackston, Aaker, & Biel, 1993). A brand persona, however, is defined by characteristics marketed by an organization or an individual, which is better defined by drawing upon concepts like social capital.

Human Brand

In social media, a brand can be controlled by, represented by, or portrayed as a human (Kerpen, 2011). Traditionally, organizational brands have been evaluated by human personality traits and personas, such as strength, intelligence, or charm (Aaker, 1997; Aaker & Fournier, 1995; Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). Recently, scholarly literature has indicated human brands are worthwhile subjects of evaluations. This is common among celebrity evaluations, which explicitly refer to humans as brands (Moulard, Garrity, & Price, 2015; Thomson, 2006; Illicic & Webster, 2013). The traditional definition of a brand involves the relationship of an organization and customers (or stockholders) with common variables like products or services offered by the organization (Luo, Chen, Han, & Whan Park, 2010). These elements fail to account for the fact
that humans form relationships with each other. A definition of a brand can also include anything that can have an emotional relationship with consumers (Bayley, 2005; Luo et al., 2010).

Consumers are known to have emotional relationships with celebrities (actors, musicians, athletes, etc.), and they may be enthusiastic supporters of celebrities. These consumers could be considered fans, some of whom greatly admire celebrities, or even revere them (Houran, Navik, & Zerrusen, 2005; Leets, De Becker, & Giles, 1995; Thomson, 2006). These fans may even think of their relationship with a celebrity as one with an acquaintance, a close friend, or even a romantic partner. Fournier (1998) found that consumers used the same language to describe their interpersonal relationships as they did with their connections with brands, which details the humanistic, personal elements of brand relationships.

In his influential paper, Thomson (2006) described three investigations into the strength of the emotional relationships between consumers and celebrities. The results suggest that human brands with stronger relationships among consumers are those that fulfill the autonomy and relatedness needs of consumers. He also found that consumers use the same language to describe their interpersonal relationships as they did with their connections with human brands, supporting the work of Fournier (1998) outlined above. Thomson (2006) uses the term “human brand” to describe any well-known persona who is the subject of marketing communications. As Carlson and Donavan (2013) showed, athletes can be classified as human brands. An example of this is Michael Jordan using his celebrity brand to drive sales of his footwear. Human brands can also be part of larger organizations. Before his retirement, Michael Jordan had a well-known individual human brand. This brand was also part of a larger brand, the Chicago Bulls, which was part of even larger brand, the NBA.
Brand-affiliated organizations may make decisions that impact the individual human brands within. For example, when the NBA has an off-the-court dress code for players, this impacts established human brands that convey a different image (Lorenz & Murray, 2013; Thomson, 2006). McDonald (2010) suggests such branding conflicts are directly tied to larger socio-economic and cultural challenges, which relate to a broader discussion of social justice among varying societal groups. Thus, investigations into human brand portrayals may have broad-reaching implications. Such formative research adds relevance to the current study’s aim of better defining human brands in media, which will enable future analyses to better uncover societal ties that stem from micro-level branding phenomena.

**Athlete Brand Equity**

The available literature on athlete brand equity stems from investigations of sports team brand equity. Gladden and Funk (2002) developed the Team Association Model (TAM), to identify the dimensions of brand associations and understand the brand equity of sports teams. The authors base their TAM on the Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model from Keller (1993). As described above, brand associations are a key conceptual component of CBBE and can be grouped into any of the three main categories of brand equity: attributes, benefits, and attitudes. For a sports team, an attribute could be a star player, a benefit could be the positive social identity obtained by a customer buying team branded apparel, and an attitude would be a customer’s comprehensive assessment of the team brand (Gladden & Funk, 2002). The authors identified 16 brand associations that consumers have about sports team brands, including star player, product delivery, nostalgia, head coach, and management. Another model of sports team brand associations, developed by Ross, James, and Vargas (2006), is known as the Team Brand Association Scale (TBAS). The TBAS does not stem from CBBE and identified 11 factors that
contribute to team brand associations, including team success, non-player personnel, team history, and social interaction.

Building upon TAM and TBAS, Arai, Ko, and Kaplanidou (2013) developed their Model of Athlete Brand Image (MABI) to understand the dimensions that influence athlete brand equity. The MABI model incorporates the brand image factor of the CBBE from Keller (1993) and is separated into three dimensions: athletic performance, attractive appearance, and marketable lifestyle (Arai et al., 2013; Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014). The authors explain that athletic performance is influenced by the athlete’s individual achievement, their sportsmanship, and rivalries. Attractive appearance is influenced by the fitness level of the athlete; the attractiveness of their face and social attractiveness; and their personal style. Marketable lifestyle is influenced by the athlete’s life off the field, such as their trustworthiness, and how they interact with fans.

Williams, Walsh, and Rhenwrick (2015) also developed a model to understand what influences brand equity amongst athletes. The athlete brand equity model (ABE) is similar to the MABI model, as they both draw on the CBBE model from Keller (1993). However, the ABE includes the effects of marketing communications outside of competitive sports. For example, the comments made by fans or members of the media may affect how an athlete is perceived, which extends beyond the impact an athlete has on the field or court to impact their brand. This is especially observable with the widespread use of social media. Kristiansen and Williams (2015) refer to the ABE in a study that performed a qualitative case study on an individual athlete to build and manage their brand equity. The authors found the athlete’s management team were focusing on creating and controlling the information marketed to consumers to build the athlete’s brand equity.
Braunstein and Zhang (2005) explored the brand attributes of athletes and their influence on consumer behavior. They developed the Scale of Athlete Star Power (SASP), which considers athletes as individual brands with specific, measurable brand attributes. Braunstein and Zhang (2005) described five factors that influence “star power” (brand equity): professional trustworthiness, likeable personality, athletic expertise, social attractiveness, and characteristic style. The MABI, developed by Arai et al. (2013), and the SASP have almost identical factors. Professional trustworthiness, likeable personality, and characteristic style may simply be grouped into “marketable lifestyle”. Braunstein and Zhang (2005) used their SASP to investigate whether athlete endorsements lead to increases in brand equity among endorsed products. They found that all factors except athletic expertise could increase the brand equity of endorsed products.

Braunstein and Zhang (2005) lean on a brand equity model (Keller, 1993) that extends to social identity and branding. This theoretical approach, while fitting and servicing, may not provide an optimal theoretical case. A separate analysis could pursue a less presumptuous approach to branding precedent; whereby, the model (constructed in another generation to the one investigated) would not serve as the guiding theoretical basis. In other words, the authors could have leaned on established theory to operationalize their study, rather than referring to previous branding analyses from which to adapt and qualify their investigation. After all, Braunstein and Zhang’s (2005) discussion section focuses more on practical implications of their findings instead of theoretical implications. Nevertheless, Braunstein and Zhang (2005) provide a relevant human-branding study stemming from concepts like social identity and social capital. As noted, the current study incorporates social identity theory to better establish brand evaluations in a social context, which helps create more expansive evaluations for future scholars. Therefore, Braunstein and Zhang’s SASP model could have more scholarly reach.
Social Capital and Athlete Brand Equity

In a competitive marketplace, a brand persona, such as an athlete, may have value, or brand equity (Spry, Pappu, & Bettina Cornwell, 2011). Despite difficulties to define this abstract element of humans, there is literature that demonstrates endorsements by human brands who have measurable financial value to other brands and their own brand. Carlson and Donavan (2013) measured how athletes’ endorsements formulate or change perceptions among fans. The authors determined endorsement affected fans perceptions of the team and their brand purchase intentions. Cunningham (2012) also demonstrated that a brand persona can gain financially through endorsements.

In addition to financial value, human brands may have measurable social capital. The literature on athlete social capital is limited, however. Many social capital studies related to sports focus on teams. For example, Underwood et al. (2001) demonstrate that increased social identity among fans with their sports team increases brand equity for the sports team. Individual human brands, such as athletes, also have fans, and the value of their human brand is affected by the emotional connection with their fans. However, Richelieu and Pons (2006) argue that social identity is not as impactful on brand equity for brands within brands, such as athletes who are part of a team. In this scenario, fans typically form strong emotional connections with the organization, rather than the individual human brands. For example, many European football (soccer) teams are known to have fervent fans (Bairner & Shirlow, 1998). As the literature demonstrates, with a finite marketplace of football fans, the teams with more fervent and loyal fans will have greater brand equity than those that do not. Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, and Exler (2008) determined the brand images of European football affected fan loyalty. However, there does not exist a comparable zealous fan base for individual football (soccer) athlete brands.
Well-known brand personas (celebrities), who may include athletes, do have considerable social capital due to their celebrity status (Hunter, Burgers, & Davidsson, 2009). Their fans and followers may form a large social network giving their individual human brands competitive advantages over their rivals. Lear, Runyan, and Whitaker (2009) demonstrate that popularity has an impact on the brand equity of athletes. This finding is supported by scholarly work from Carlson and Donavan (2013). However, the social connections made with celebrities are less likely to be interactive (Rubin & McHugh, 1987), and these connections may also fade over time without fan-celebrity interactions. Luo et al. (2010) investigated the effects on brand equity of movie star human brands. The authors found the favorability of human brands decreases significantly over time if consumers are not regularly exposed to the human brand. This is contrary to the results of Aaker (1991), who found the favorability of product and service brands were relatively stable over time. Their results suggest the brand equity of celebrity brands can be diluted or enhanced by each new “product launch”. As presented in their study, an example may include a movie star appearing in a new movie. For athlete brands, this could mean their brands can be feasibly diluted or enhanced by their athletic performance or other activities in media like posts in social media.

**Athletes and the College Environment**

On-field and on-court performances in the university environment are often broadcast on television or online streaming. Along with the power of university brand associations, athletes may garner exceptional appeal to fans and followers (Summers & Morgan, 2008). Often, social media provides an “informal camaraderie”, which may include individuals like athletes, who are seemingly beyond the average user’s social grasp (Chen, 2011 p. 759). Each participant in the survey analysis attends a university with a high performing football program with a national
championship in its recent history. Respondents have likely attended or viewed a sporting event that earned selection by the NCAA’s College Football Playoff Committee to compete in a nationally spotlighted bowl game within the past few years. The team’s fan base, which includes followers of various enthusiasm levels, ranks among the nation’s most populous, considering the university’s history, size, and success in competitive sports over the past century.

Each respondent included in the study has likely been exposed directly or indirectly to an athlete’s proactive engagement (Mersey et al., 2010) with their online followers. This may take the form of a post on social media directly addressing fans (e.g., thanking fans for their support). As Muntinga, Moorman, and Smit (2011) found, this form of engagement is an expression of intention online. It demonstrates a user’s motivation to communicate with an audience and may impact brand valuations.

**Popularity Perceptions Among Sports Fans**

To help explain how brand personas are perceived among social media users, the current study considers social media users as consumers (Hambrick & Mahoney, 2011), as well as students. Brand equity literature describes brands as competing entities in a marketplace (Agrawal & Kamakura, 1995; Seno & Lukas, 2007). Thus, hypotheses are formulated in the current study that factor the following: brands exist in a marketplace (i.e., persona brands in social media), where consumer sentiment may ultimately contribute to a perceived brand image (e.g., positive perception or negative perception) (Faircloth, Capella, & Alford, 2001). Bentley (2011) suggests athletes invite controversy by engaging in online media, which has led some universities to ban or limit social media use among athletes to protect them or express support for their future (Gay, 2011). Whether operating in a sports school media space or broader sports media market (e.g., statewide sports franchise like the Minnesota Vikings from the National
Football League), athlete brands may face restrictions from their principal stakeholders (e.g., franchise owners; Umar, 2015). However, such restrictions may not deter athletes from actively posting and garnering large followership (Sanderson & Browning, 2013). The literature suggests more followers on social media could lead to higher brand equity (Broughton, 2012; Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014), which means an athlete brand can gain value by gaining followers. Furthermore, social media could be utilized as a catalyst toward celebrity status.

**Brand Perceptions Among Athletes**

Bush, Martin, and Bush (2004) suggest athletes can have celebrity appeal, which can create name brand recognition that extends to sports fans. Studies that explore why athletes engage social media have found that athletes have three identifiable reasons, “keeping in contact, communicating with followers and accessing information” (Browning & Sanderson, 2012, p. 503; Clavio & Kian, 2010; Pegoraro, 2010). Such studies offer useful insight on engagement motives from athletes (Browning & Sanderson, 2012), which reveal athletes’ vulnerability to harsh slander and criticism directed through social media. Another useful insight from previous studies of athletes engaged in social media includes information on athletes’ intentional reputation management (Agyemang, 2014). This study also reveals that athletes can build a positive reputation through “authentic” engagement with fans (p. 33). Such engagement suggests athletes willingly communicate with sports fans and hold influence over how they are perceived. This behavior indicates a self-awareness among athletes that they represent a brand.

Brogan (2015) pursues in-depth interviews in an analysis of athletes’ perceptions of their own brand. The study reveals a notional understanding among athletes of their brands, along with a sense of awareness of their ability to impact their brand. The current study, therefore, assumes athletes maintain some modicum of understanding of their own branding control with
potential for exceptional awareness regarding their own brand. Therefore, sports fans have likely been exposed to an athlete brand in social media, and have likely consumed branding messages with branding intention from the athlete.

For outstanding athletes who consider themselves standout performers (Braunstein & Zhang, 2005), their reputations are possibly impacted through social media use (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012). Thus, it is reasonable to assume athletes have an incentive to intentionally apply individual public relations strategies or branding strategies to build their reputation online. For athletes who aim to build a positive reputation (Stoldt, Dittmore, & Branvold, 2012), social media is increasingly relevant, especially considering there is an engaged audience online (Agyemang, 2014; Raney, 2006). Such positive branding in social media is also important when factoring the implications a reputation may have on an athlete’s draft position with a professional sports entity such as the National Football League (NFL), the National Basketball Association (NBA), or an Olympic volleyball team (Hendricks, DeBrock & Koenker, 2003; Horn, 1977).

With these considerations, the current study justifies a heavy focus on sports fans and athlete brands in social media.

Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold (2012) describe reputation as “built largely on confidence and trust” (p. 41). Furthermore, L’Etang (2007), in an overview of communications concepts, offer Eisenegger’s (2005) perspective of a reputation as “the product of the social process that assigns agents their ranking in society. To this extent, public relations can at its core be understood as reputation nurturing” (Eisenegger, 2005, pg. 1). Arai, Ko, and Ross (2014) suggest such reputation efforts create a brand image, which followers and fans of athletes will perceive. Ballouli and Hutchinson (2010), argue specific branding strategies should be employed to loyal
fans to help protect an athlete’s brand image, which will then help control how rival fans of the athlete perceive the brand.

**Brand Persona Management in Sports**

Media may construct negative characteristics of athletes and their unscrupulous off-field behavior (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). Such framing may be magnified or presented with perverse portrayals in social media (Sanderson, 2010). Sanderson (2012) suggests brand identity can and should be constructed by athletes, which many are beginning to pursue as a protective measure against negative portrayals. This branding approach assumes sports fans are exposed to athlete brands in social media. Broughton (2012) suggests this is the case with an analysis of social media’s enticing real-time gratification for emboldening fan opinions about athletes. DiVeronica (2014) also suggests an increasingly social media spotlight on athletes can produce negative impacts on their own brand if mismanaged.

Sanderson (2012) acknowledges followership for an athlete’s social media account is an indicator of the level of appeal among social media participants, which are assumed to include sports fans. Cunningham and Bright (2012) further acknowledge followership’s perceived value by analyzing promotional value and endorsement value of an athlete’s social media presence. The authors suggest higher followership may result in more endorsement value, which would indicate a potentially high brand value for the athlete. McKelvey and Masteralexis (2011) express the necessity to build followership to help establish an athlete’s identity, while Smith and Sanderson (2012) suggest this is widely occurring on social media among athletes. The current study omits social media followership from the stimuli presented to respondents due to the aforementioned value perceived by sports fans.
**Media and Athlete Brands**

Media may significantly factor into brand valuations of athletes. Media broadcasts sporting events in which athletes are portrayed to millions of people (Atkinson, 2002) while disseminating brand images of human brands (Bishop, 2003). This dissemination includes athletic performance and personality attributes. During broadcasts, whether televised or streamed online (Real, 2006), media may participate in framing to help shape perceptions of viewers. Literature focused on media influence pertaining to perceived reputations primarily focuses on organizations, not individuals (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999; Grunig, 1983; Grunig, 2003; Grunig, 2013). Conversely, Diga, and Kelleher (2009) acknowledge that reputation (referred to as a brand in the current study) can be constructed and maintained by the individual. The current study leans on that assumption and utilizes social media’s individualistic profile format (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011) to evaluate perceptions of athlete brands. By conducting such an inquiry, there is an inherent acknowledgment that athletes’ branding initiatives (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012) or external media influences may impact perceptions of brands.

With the advent of new media, a term synonymous with social media (Shirky, 2011), an athlete’s brand has access to wider audiences and can interact directly with their fans. Benigni, Porter, and Wood (2009) indicate that new media can allow thousands, or even millions, of fans to interact with an athlete’s brand. Leonard (2009) argues that new media is defined by its increased accessibility and interactivity with fans, compared to traditional media. He also argues that new media allows relationships to develop with fans, which can increase a fan’s emotional connection with athletes, and thus, increase an athlete’s brand equity.
Non-human brands have had success using social media to increase their brand equity. Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, and Füller (2013) showed that engagement of social media users leads to increased brand awareness and influences the purchasing decisions of consumers. Kim and Ko (2012) showed the use of Twitter could influence brand equity. The authors argued the use of social media marketing provided novel value to consumers compared to marketing via traditional media. There is also some evidence that athlete brands can increase brand equity through social media. Frederick, Lim, Clavio, and Walsh (2012) found that athletes with more fan interaction through Twitter allows them to form deeper relationships with their fans. The authors argue this could “have a direct impact on the sales of products these athletes represent” (p. 498).

Brand personas, as a conscious living entity (a human), may view social media as an opportunity for marketing and brand building. Tsimonis and Dimitriadis (2014) found that brand personas (referred to as “brands” in their study) used social media marketing to interact with customers, create or strengthen customer relationships, increase brand awareness, and promote their products. Consumers also perceive value in interacting with brands. For example, sports fans enjoy interacting with athletes via social media. Broughton (2012) found that sports fans are interested in the athlete’s thoughts about the game and enjoy celebrating their team’s victories. Social media provides direct access to these real-time gratifications for fan experience (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), which also present fruitful, public quantifiers for brand equity (e.g., a number of followers). Furthermore, social media is inherently social (Yunusov, 2014) and presents an environment where sports fans may interact with athletes directly. This creates a dynamic media environment with various branding outcomes. To begin defining this space, along with operationalizing a study that evaluates human brands, the current study incorporates social media.
Social Media and Social Identity Theory

Social media is defined as an interconnected community of users engaged in an online experience of computerized communication exchanges through various functions that may include writing, picture sharing, or other forms of expression (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). To explain why athletes engage social media to build a reputation, and why audiences engage social media to exercise fan behavior, this study refers to social identity theory (SIT). Studies based in SIT that explore reasons for social media engagement among users have explored self-esteem, group identity, and human behavior (Barker, 2009; Cheung, Chiu, & Lee, 2011). However, it must be noted that social media is a vastly unexplored area for the SIT scholarly community. Despite SIT’s readily applicable conceptual framework to evaluate the social media environment, there is an apparent reticence among communication scholars to advance the literature in this space. The current study’s aim is not to speculate on the root cause for a gap in the literature other than to acknowledge social media’s dynamic, and ever-changing landscape as a likely factor. Rather, the current study offers a contribution that aims to offer a replicable, logical, and useful solution.

Social media, as a concept, is included in the current analysis based on various platforms’ functionality of public followers. Meaning, followers can be listed on public profiles. However, Twitter is the main platform utilized in the stimuli presented to respondents in the current study. Twitter enables users to build public lists of preferred followers, along with other public followership indicators. Twitter also enables engaged audiences to like, comment, or share each post that is marked “public”. The relationship of an engaged public or engaged audiences (Cutlip, 1962) between athletes and sports fans online is personalized through social media’s
platform design (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). This personalization enables individual reputation-building (Clavio, 2011) or branding.

A “function” in social media is defined as an engagement tool, which may include posting, sharing, liking, following, or another form of connectivity and expression through the digital mechanics of a social media platform (Evans, 2012; Safko, 2010). These functions may also serve as strategies regarding branding (Kick, 2015). In other words, if a button titled “follow” on social media enables a user to click it, and the click results in a connection between the two accounts, this is considered a function. This function may also serve to expose a primary user to the secondary user’s followers, which can then attract attention onto the primary user’s profile. This may result in increased followership (Sweeney & Craig, 2010). Thus, the function of “following” may serve as a strategy. Moreover, a function deals with the mechanics of how a user engages a social media platform to execute a branding strategy. The “follow” function’s prominence on nearly all social media platforms is what adds relevance to online media’s incorporation into the current study. In other words, social media is a prominent media environment where people may easily follow athletes, or choose to not follow and still gauge the level of interest others have by viewing the number of followers engaged in the athlete’s profile. Thus, brand perceptions are directly tied to the functions of social media.

Athletes may proactively communicate with their engaged audience using social media (Clavio, 2011). This concept of an athlete communicating with a specific public leans on Grunig’s (1978) noteworthy work, which laid the foundation for the communication models (Grunig, 1983) that helped define engagement processes for organizations or individuals with large, attentive audiences. Essentially, any outcome or influence that may result from strategic communication with an engaged audience (Pegoraro & Jinnah, 2012) by athletes in social media
is considered a construct of branding or brand strategy, whether intentional or unintentional. In such communicative scenarios, fans’ opinions of athletes could be impacted.

In 2015, an estimated 59 percent of American adults self-identified as sports fans (Gallup Poll, 2015). The current study reasonably assumes most American adults remain sports fans. As of 2015, 65 percent of American adults were engaged in some form of social media (AdWeek.com, 2015). The current study reasonably assumes most American adults remain engaged in social media. Thus, an athlete’s involvement in social media will likely include an engaged community fan base (Sanderson, 2013). With such exposure on interactive platforms (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011), the respondent pool included in the current study (college students) are likely exposed to sports branding on campus. Furthermore, the athletes’ brands to which they are exposed could be through social media, which could contribute to brand perceptions (Agyemang, 2011). Thus, this study’s analysis touches on several relevant elements of branding in media: social media, sports media, human brands, and brand perceptions among sports fans.

**Survey Methodology in Sports Social Media Literature**

The body of sports media literature pertaining to social media that investigates opinions and perceptions of athlete brands through survey method is underdeveloped considering the number of phenomenological studies that merit investigation. The online marketplace’s dynamic characteristics (Jarvis, 2011; Roberts, 2001) are likely a reason as to why the literature does not explore brand perceptions in social media. Understandably, if the online media space is ever-changing (Swatman, Krueger, & Van Der Beek, 2006), then communication studies in this area could be quickly rendered outdated, non-contributive, or no longer relevant at the time of publishing. Thus, there is a natural disincentive in the academy to pursue investigations in social
media in the sports marketplace, which has potentially limited media-related branding studies in this space. Nevertheless, there are several studies that fit the criteria of quantitative analysis through a survey of media consumers’ opinions and behavior regarding brands in sports (Broughton, 2012; Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000; Wann, Friedman, McHale, & Jaffe, 2003).

Key Definitions

Operational definitions for this study are provided in this section.

**Sports school:** A post-secondary institution with large-scale investments in athletics facilities, multi-million-dollar revenue streams from sports, and nationally-recognized collegiate athletic programs that receive championship-caliber accolades. Respondents for the current study are recruited from a sports school.

**Athlete:** An individual who competes in a division regulated by a governing body (e.g., NCAA) and is an active player on a sports team with which fans may associate or identify.

**Sports fan:** An individual with varying degrees of enthusiasm, interest, and devotion to a specific sports team or athlete’s brand.

**Social media:** Interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications that allow users to create and share user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

**Twitter:** A social media application and platform that allows users to send short messages (140 characters or less) (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and has over 313 million monthly active users (Statista.com, 2016). Twitter operates as a website and application and connects users through an application programming interface.
with posts, media sharing (e.g., pictures and videos), lists, and hashtags, among other functions (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015).

**Likeability:** Referring to Reysen’s (2005) brand image scale, the term, likeability, pertains to how sports fans perceive brand attributes or a media message. Likeability is further defined in the context of brand reactions from sports fans, which is a result of cognition-based perceptions (Nguyen, Melewar, & Chen, 2013). Such perceptions may relate to group status (ingroup/outgroup) and/or message tone.

**Group Status:** A sports fans’ perceived relationship with an athlete brand may dictate an ingroup affiliation or outgroup affiliation. Either category defines group status. Social identity theory explains that group identity is a recurring behavioral outcome of societies of varying formations (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Such identity constructs often relate to pursuits of social mobility (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and may be a byproduct of social competition (Haslam et al., 2010).

**Message Tone:** Messages coded as positive and negative signify categorical assignments pertaining to message stimuli for respondents (sports fans) to rate likeability on athlete branded tweets. Message tone refers to either positive or negative message included in the study design and is defined as a perceived emotional or cognitive trigger by which a media consumer associates positivity or negativity in relation to media content (Kwak, Kwon, & Lim, 2015).

**Observable and Related Variables: Likeability, Message Tone, and Group Status**

Sports fans who are exposed to athlete brand personas in media develop associations with an athlete’s brand, which may contribute to an overall sentiment (or perception) of the athlete.
This assumption is supported by a social media user’s ability to view messages, whether positive or negative, that directly associate with a brand persona (Witkemper, Lim, & Waldburger, 2012). The viewership of media content attributed to brand personas (i.e., an athlete publicly posting on their account) enables media consumers to interpret meaning and perceive value from the content (Williams & Chinn, 2010). Furthermore, the content posted by brand personas projects a brand image which is measurable (Reysen, 2005). This measurable perception of a brand image among media consumers is operationalized as likeability in the current study. However, the term is not simply appropriated to represent the results on a brand image scale (Reysen, 2005) from sports fans’ reactions to social media posts. The current study also factors Nguyen, Melewar, and Chen’s (2013) definition of likeability to include cognitive processes that are affected by contextual variables. Such variables may include group status (ingroup and outgroup) and message tone (positive and negative).

In a broad analysis that gauges likeability in the sports media environment, Easter, Leoni, and Wiles (2008) test controversial messages and branding elements (e.g., logos) involving sensitive identity markers. These sensitivities include racial, gendered, and nationalistic characteristics. Their study demonstrates that likeability is a byproduct of the relationship between a media consumer and a brand. As with any branding scenario, the sports media environment requires fans to be exposed to media before developing a relationship. Logically, without such exposure, a sports fan cannot recall or interact with a brand cognitively or behaviorally. Social media provides a convenient and easily accessible platform to generate such exposure for sports fans (Blaszka, Burch, Frederick, Clavio, & Walsh, 2012). Consumer behavior pertaining to likeability (i.e., whether a fan perceives posts as likeable) may motivate social media followership (Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016) or purchases of apparel.
representing an athlete brand (O’Reilly & Braedley, 2008). Likeability may also motivate sporting event attendance (Fink, Cunningham, & Kensicki, 2004) or participation in sports rituals to celebrate or vilify athlete brands (Burton, Farrelly, & Quester, 2001).

Likeability may also influence identification with a brand (i.e., sports team affiliation in fanfare; Braunstein-Minkove, Zhang, & Trail, 2011) and can prompt tension when controversy disrupts a previously established brand relationship (Parker & Fink, 2010). For example, an unpopular athlete may prompt protectionism from fans over their team identity, which may outcast the athlete brand (Branscombe, Wann, Noel, & Coleman, 1993). The term, likeability, is operationalized in the current study to represent a sports fans’ varying degrees of favorability (Reysen, 2005) as a reaction to media messages presented as tweets from athletes. While controversy is presented in negative messages within one category of tweets, positive messages are also included. Existing literature affirms that sports fans perceive varying degrees of likeability toward an athlete brand when presented with controversial content (Brown & Billings, 2013; Brown, Brown, & Billings, 2015) and positive content (Browning & Sanderson, 2012). Furthermore, existing literature reveals such message effects to have relationships with group status.

**Hypotheses and Research Questions**

Grohs, Reisinger, and Woisetschlager (2015) demonstrate message effects pertaining to group status by presenting sponsorships of rival teams to sports fans. The authors determine that level of fan identification has a direct effect on a sponsorship’s likeability. A stronger fan will consider a brand sponsorship of a rival team more negatively. Thus, an outgroup sponsorship is perceived as a negative message from sports fans. When incorporating the operationalized terms of the current study, Grohs, Reisinger, and Woisetschlager’s (2015) found a high level of fan
identification relates to a high level of negative effects from outgroup sponsorships. A notable outcome, perhaps, is that a message effect is observable when factoring group status, message tone, and likeability. More specifically, results from Grohs, Reisinger, and Woisetschläger’s (2015) study support the notion that higher levels of fan identification impact likeability when factoring message tone. This outcome helps substantiate the hypotheses included in the current analysis.

Another critical study to support the hypotheses of the current analysis includes Underwood et al. (2001). As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the study determines that positive branding strengthens a customers’ (fans’) identity, which results in increased brand equity. In other words, likeability impacts a brand’s perceived quality among customers. Interpreting this outcome in a sports context, likeability among athletes in social media should correlate with positive message tone and ingroup status (team affiliation with the sports fan). Boyle and Magnusson (2007), in a study based on social identity theory, investigate brand perceptions in the collegiate environment, which the current analysis pursues. Boyle and Magnusson (2007) determine that social identity has a positive effect on brand equity. This means likeability is impacted by group status. Watkins (2014) affirm Boyle and Magnusson’s (2007) results and determine that group status is the most important factor influencing social identity. The aforementioned studies offer useful examples for operationalizing inquiries into the social and human aspects of branding in the sports arena. Furthermore, the studies substantiate hypotheses that predict likeability with positive message tone and ingroup status. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1:** There will be a significant main effect of fan identification on likeability ratings.
Kwak, Kim, and Zimmerman (2010) provide another example where message tone directly impacts likeability among sports fans. In their study, positive and negative messages are presented to consumers of sports media while also gauging their level of team identification. Kwak, Kim, and Zimmerman (2010) reveal message tone (termed “message valence” in their article) impacts likeability by triggering biases in media consumers. Furthermore, team identification, or level of fanfare, also factors into likeability. Other variables like media source are considered in Kwak, Kim, and Zimmerman’s (2010) study, but the investigation of message tone’s relationship to likeability among sports fans provides a replicable approach for the current study’s operationalization.

Message tone pertains to the markers of positivity or negativity in a media message (Reeves, Newhagen, Maibach, Basil, Kurz, 1991). As established in this chapter, the majority of college students are users of social media. These users are conceivably exposed to various social media messages (both positive and negative) pertaining to sports and athletes (Clavio & Walsh, 2014). The current study analyzes respondents’ perceptions of branded tweets from athletes, which are social media messages serving as stimuli. This approach reflects substantial literature analyzing the effects of message tone in social media (Bekafigo & Pingley, 2015; Kapidzic & Herring, 2011; Marland, 2015), while offering a focus on the sports media environment. This approach builds on existing literature to further explore relationships between likeability and message tone. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: There will be a significant main effect of message tone on likeability ratings.

Group status is defined as the identity-associations (e.g., favorite-team-identified or rival-team-identified) with which a sports fan claims ownership (Fink, Parker, Brett, & Higgins, 2009). Brand attributes like team logos, mascot apparel, or an athlete’s features (e.g., a beard)
may be mimicked or worn by fans as a signifier of association (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008). This behavioral expression creates a personalized group-identity signal with social implications. As described in social identity theory (SIT), identity ownership factors social mobility (Branscombe & Wann, 1991) and social competition (Dietz-Uhler & Murrell, 1999). A fan’s group identity with a winning team may increase their social capital, which provides tangible benefits like peer approval (Wann & Weaver, 2009) and intangible benefits like improved self-esteem and self-worth (Wann, 2006).

There are numerous formations of group constructs stemming from millions of athletes and thousands of sports teams around the world. To narrow the current study, the inclusion of group status is chosen among variables evaluated, and a binary assessment of ingroup and outgroup are drawn from SIT literature. Branscombe and Wann (1992) determine ingroup and outgroup identification are worthwhile variables to measure sentiments (aggression) among sports fans. Among their findings, sports fans may target an outgroup member when the ingroup’s team is defeated. In another study by Wann and Branscombe (1993), the authors establish a fan identity scale meant to establish high-level and low-level fans.

Over 500 studies have cited Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) approach to determine the level of identification with a sports team. A notable example with tie-in to branding in media includes Gwinner and Swanson’s (2003) study which advances fan identification analysis to determine sponsorship outcomes. Another study that cites Wann and Branscombe (1993) to advance their study is Kerr and Gladden (2008), which explores brand equity evaluations of team identification in a global marketplace. Fink, Parker, Brett, and Higgins (2009) incorporate SIT to evaluate fan reactions to athletes’ behavior off the field, which signifies SIT as a relevant theory to base an investigation of how athletes’ brand value in social media are perceived.
Underwood, Bond, and Baer (2001) also assess ingroup and outgroup membership in their study, which evaluates how sports marketers may increase brand equity among sports fans. This means, the study investigates how marketing messages can increase consumers’ identification with a brand in a competitive marketplace, which focuses on the sports domain. Thus, Underwood, Bond, and Baer’s (2001) investigation consider sports fans media consumers who are exposed to branded messages. Furthermore, their analysis considers group status as relevant variables to measure relationships to likeability.

Carlson, Donavan, and Cumiskey (2009) focus more narrowly on sports fans’ relationships with sport brands and incorporate the binary group status, ingroup or outgroup membership, into their study design. Their study factors brand attributes and sport fans’ perceptions (i.e., gauges of likeability from sports fans regarding sports brands). Madrigal (2000) evaluate group status to determine if ingroup and outgroup membership impact consumer purchase behavior. Their study suggests consumers with a social alignment with a team brand (sports fans) have a higher propensity to purchase associated brands of their ingroup (e.g., corporate sponsors of their sports team brand). Variables related to message tone (e.g., brand identity and brand attributes), group status, and likeability are factored in the aforementioned literature of this section. More notably, the extended literature on branding, sports, and social identity theory provide numerous examples for incorporating group status into study designs evaluating message tone and likeability. The articles express how positive ingroup messaging—which has various iterations in the marketplace (e.g., logo placement on associated ingroup brands, social alignment sponsorships, and positive rhetoric in team marketing messages)—can have a direct, measurable relationship with likeability (as perceived by sports fans). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:
H3: There will be a significant main effect of group status on likeability ratings.

Considering the aforementioned literature, interaction effects between the variables tested herein are relevant in the sports media domain. However, while athlete branding may draw interest from future scholars who focus on social media, renderings on the star status of athletes (i.e., observations on the fame and notoriety of athletes) may become a more salient, explored topic (Yang & Shi, 2011). Branding phenomena in sports often focus on the athlete or team, rather than sports fans and branding effects (and the interactions between each of these variables). When the sports fan becomes a subject of analysis, branding effects are explored (Boyle & Magnusson, 2007), but understanding of the interaction effects between message tone, group status, and likeability of brands (particularly athlete brands in social media) should be tested. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: There will be a significant three-way interaction between fan identification, message tone, and group status.

The overemphasis on athletes and teams, rather than interaction effects of the variables considered in the current study, is a result of media production that aims to capture storylines and portray images of athletes and teams for a viewing public (fans). Thus, the agent group (focus of attention) in sports media is often the athletes and teams, and the target group for media dissemination (the receiver of a message or media) are prospective fans. An external stakeholder for media viewership are advertisers concerned about unit economics (i.e., the amount spent on advertising measured against the number of people exposed to the advertisement) (Bush, Martin, & Bush, 2004). These communities are important to acknowledge to understand how the literature has limited focus on individual branding in sports media, particularly among sports fans in the collegiate environment involving social media.
Stimuli presented to respondents in the current study do not signify university-related branding. However, all the respondents included in the study are undergraduates enrolled in a sports school who attend classes on campus. The reason for the general-branding approach, rather than the university-branding approach, is to avoid sharp biases of a specific athlete’s star power. Sports branding on campus is likely ubiquitous for any enrolled student who attends classes on campus. The study design acknowledges varying levels of fan identity on college campuses (Wann, Dolan, McGeorge, & Allison, 1994), but the overwhelming majority of studies demonstrate intense fanfare at sports schools (Botzung, Rubin, Miles, Cabeza, & LaBar, 2010; Higgins, Tewksbury, & Mustaine, 2007). Moreover, previous studies utilizing convenience samples of college students indicate correlating relationships between fan intensity and brand perceptions (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). The current study aims to extend the literature on brands and fan identification in sports media by offering inquiries to determine unforeseen relationships between the variables considered herein. Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

**RQ1:** Is there a significant two-way interaction between fan identification and message tone?

**RQ2:** Is there a significant two-way interaction between fan identification and group status?

**RQ3:** Is there a significant two-way interaction between message tone and group status?

**Theoretical Figure of Factors Impacting Likeability**

Within the theoretical diagram all hypothesized, anticipated, and possible significant correlations, main effects, and interactions—among and between the main factors and outcome variable—are displayed. The three main independent variables, or factors, within the study are
identified as fan identification, message tone, and group status. Within the three-way ANOVA design, each main factor has two different levels identified as high-level fan identification, low-level fan identification, positive message tone, negative message tone, ingroup status, and outgroup status. The dependent variable or, outcome variable, is represented as likability.

Each factor and condition, along with the outcome variable, is represented as having significant theoretical interactions and impacts as depicted by directional arrows to and from factors and towards likeability. Each main factor and their conditions are hypothesized and anticipated to have some type of significant interaction among themselves, particularly the hypothesized three-way interaction. The general research questions posed within the study are also represented by arrows signifying each main factors’ anticipated significant interactions on another main effect variable (i.e. fan identification x message tone, fan identification x group status, and message tone x group status). Moreover, all the main factors and their conditions are anticipated and hypothesized to have a significant impact on likability, which are also reflected by the directional arrows from each factor and condition to likeability.
Summary of Hypotheses and Research Questions

The following hypotheses and research questions aim to evaluate likeability and relationships between fan identity, message tone, and group status. In such a pursuit, the study operationalizes a conceptual synthesis of brand equity and social capital, which increases explanatory power regarding branding phenomena in social media. In a preliminary step in offering more in-depth explanation of this space, the current study focuses on sports branding and media regarding athlete posts on Twitter. The current study gauges sports fans’ reactions to social media posts from athletes who are associated with either an ingroup or outgroup. The following hypotheses and research questions represent calculable inquiries for statistical evaluation, which are further explained in the following chapter.

**H1:** There will be a significant main effect of fan identification on likeability ratings.

**H2:** There will be a significant main effect of message tone on likeability ratings.
H3: There will be a significant main effect of group status on likeability ratings.

H4: There will be a significant three-way interaction between fan identification, message tone, and group status.

RQ1: Is there a significant two-way interaction between fan identification and message tone?

RQ2: Is there a significant two-way interaction between fan identification and group status?

RQ3: Is there a significant two-way interaction between message tone and group status?
CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

To assess the hypotheses and research questions detailed in chapter two, the following variables were factored, along with their corresponding conditions in parentheses: Fan identification (high-level/low-level), message tone (positive/negative), and group status (ingroup/outgroup). Along with definitions of variables and operationalization, this chapter details the methodology used to determine conditions within scale measure variables. Furthermore, the chapter outlines instrumentation, survey components, and pre-tests involved in executing the current study.

Variables

Fan Identification: Independent Variable

Fan identification was computed using Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) ten-item fan identity scale scored on an eight-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = Not Important and 8 = Very Important. The measure was calculated as the mean score across scale variables. Conbach’s alpha was employed for scale variables such as fan identification and likeability. The threshold was set at .8, which refers to Peterson’s (1994) meta-analysis of Cronbach’s alpha to determine an appropriate marker by which the current study may consider internal reliability acceptable in communication science. Using Cronbach’s alpha, internal reliability of the items tested was acceptable ($\alpha = .88$), with a mean of 5.37 ($SD = 1.40$), and minimum/maximum values of 2.00 and 7.14. The measure was then recoded as a binary measure, with respondents categorized as having high or low fan identification, with the cut point calculated as the median value (5.71).
The aforementioned values were determined through a pilot study, which is detailed later in this chapter.

**Message Tone: Independent Variable**

Respondents were presented with tweets that contained either a positive or negative message, which were created by the investigator. *Message Tone* was therefore a variable for which participants had one of two possible values: positive or negative. Respondents were coded into one of two “message tone” groups based on the stimuli presented to them (tweets). A dummy variable, *positivemessage*, was computed with respondents presented with simulated tweets containing a negative message coded as 0 and respondents presented with simulated tweets containing a positive message coded as 1. A measures pre-test was conducted to validate the categorization of messages as positive or negative, and the method and results of the pre-test are described below. See Appendix A for the pre-test survey.

**Group Status: Independent Variable**

Respondents were presented with tweets that were attributed to either a “favorite team athlete” or a “rival team athlete”, which was indicated by the name associated with each tweet. *Group Status* was therefore a variable for which participants had one of two possible values: ingroup (favorite team athlete) or outgroup (rival team athlete). Respondents were coded into one of two “group status” groups based on the stimuli presented to them. A dummy variable, *ingroup*, was computed with respondents presented with simulated tweets containing an outgroup message coded as 0 and respondents presented with simulated tweets containing an ingroup message coded as 1.

**Likeability: Dependent Variable**

Participants completed the likeability scale adapted from Reysen (2005), which rated the
likeability of the tweet attributed to an athlete. The dependent variable for the present study was the respondents’ likeability scores of the tweet’s messenger. Likeability ratings were computed using an adapted version of Reysen’s (2005) ten-item likeability scale, which prompts participants to rate each statement on a ten-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = Not at All and 10 = Extremely. The measure is calculated as the mean score across scale variables. Using Cronbach’s alpha, internal reliability of the items tested was good (α = .98).

**Sampling**

Respondents were college age sports media consumers recruited from a large southern university with a longstanding tradition (i.e., over 20 years) of nationally televised sports. At the university, sports are considered pervasive, recurring themes of university culture (Estler & Nelson, 2005; Wechsler & Wuethrich, 2002). By referring to sports fans as sports media consumers, there is an inherent assumption that sports media is consumed intentionally and unintentionally (or willingly and unwillingly). The current study assumed that a “sports school” provides an environment with enough sports media that every student is either directly or indirectly exposed to sports content (Nelson & Wechsler, 2003; Xiao-feng, 2003; Yang & Gong, 2001).

Respondents were undergraduate students enrolled at the university where they were recruited, which was verified by instructors overseeing the classes where the survey was conducted. All respondents were informed of IRB approval in the consent form provided before the experiment, which is also referred to as a “survey” to indicate the survey measure utilized in the current study design. Respondents were also informed of IRB approval through an announcement by the principal investigator at the beginning of the respondents’ class. All participants of the survey were given the option to volunteer to be included in the study and were
informed there would not be a reward or extra credit for their participation. All survey respondents’ identities remained anonymous throughout the data collection and reporting of the study.

**Instrumentation**

**Relevant Studies for Instrumentation**

The current study’s survey measure drew from investigatory principles from Boyle and Magnusson (2007) who tested Underwood, Bond, and Bear’s (2001) social identity—brand equity (SIBE) model. Underwood et al., (2001) focus on sports branding with the conceptual development of the SIBE model, which is adapted from Keller’s (1993) customer based brand equity (CBBE) model. The CBBE model, as a foundation piece and precursor to the SIBE model, merged with SIT framework to operationalize evaluations of athletes’ measurable brand qualities. Underwood et al., (2001) expanded the consideration of brand personas to the communications domain, with crossover to business and sociology. Boyle and Magnusson (2007), in their contributions to brand studies, operationalized a comparative survey analysis of sports fans, which revealed that brand attributes of sports teams may enhance sports fans’ social identity to a team. Boyle and Magnusson’s (2007) survey approach provides the investigatory precedent by which the current study may inquire to sports fans directly about their brand perceptions of athletes.

The current study also drew from the aforementioned SASP scale from Braunstein and Zhang (2005), which is rooted in SIT and serves as validation that athletes have brand attributes. Thus, athletes may be considered brands with observable behavior and qualities about which sports fans may render opinions. Braunstein and Zhang (2005) investigate college students’ opinions of athlete brands, and this target population represents sports fans. In their study,
Braunstein and Zhang (2005) utilize SIT to develop SASP, which considers athletes as individual brands with specific, measurable brand attributes. Ultimately, these attributes make up a brand image, which Braunstein and Zhang (2005) revealed can influence perceptions or change consumer behavior. Thus, Braunstein and Zhang’s (2005) findings inform the current study’s approach to survey construction used in the experiment by treating athletes as individuals with brand images portrayed in media. Moreover, the survey elements of the current study factored the SIBE model by assuming a relationship between media consumers and athlete brands; whereby, questions may directly ask sports fans levels (of various degrees) how they perceive athlete brands in social media in various scenarios (e.g., a positive/negative tweet and ingroup/outgroup status).

Braunstein and Zhang’s (2005) study provided a pathway for the current research to operationalize athletes as brands, as their study indicated a potential brand influence in social media among media consumers in the sports marketplace. This advancement contributes directly to SIT literature focused on branding, which aligns with the current study’s aims. The SASP scale principles also helped orient the current study’s questionnaire to athlete brands and sports media consumers. However, the current study did not use Braunstein and Zhang’s (2005) respondent demographic of high schoolers and middle schoolers. Instead, the current study focused on the college demographic of sports fans.

Ultimately, the consideration of athletes as brands—as exemplified in the SASP scale by Braunstein and Zhang (2005) and validated through a multi-methodological analysis that includes surveys of media consumers—presents a conceptual guide for the current study’s survey measure. Furthermore, the direct engagement of media consumers about their perceptions of athletes’ brands—as exemplified by Boyle and Magnusson (2007) in their analysis of social
identity and sports team brands—affirms the theoretical basis used to operationalize the current study may reveal important relationships between sports media consumers and brands in the sports marketplace. Meanwhile, the survey approach of the current study has a structural and conceptual reference from which to advance an investigation of brand perceptions in social media.

**Static Tweet Stimuli**

Braunstein and Zhang (2005) present static brand image stimuli to respondents that included portrayals of individual athletes and coaches. This static portrayal of athlete branding aimed to generalize to “various sports settings” (p. 57). Braunstein and Zhang’s (2005) approach to gauging respondents’ opinions through stimuli served as justification for the current study to present static tweets of individual athletes. This approach is also consistent with previous analyses incorporating static tweet stimuli (Morris, Counts, Roseway, Hoff, & Schwarz, 2012; Towner, 2016; Zubiaga, 2014).

The current study presented static content portraying athletes who were presumably tweeting (i.e., athletes posting branded content from their accounts). Static tweets are modeled after archived tweets, or tweets that are present on a Twitter user’s account. This is distinguishable from an active Twitter feed, which shows new tweets populating in real-time. Both functions are currently present and common fixtures in Twitter (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015; Wang & Zhou, 2015). Limitations pertaining to static tweet stimuli are addressed in the discussion chapter.

**Survey Components**

A full copy of the survey instrument is included as Appendix B. After respondents agreed to participate in the study they were asked to provide their age and gender, which were collected
to determine if there were any limitations from underrepresented demographics within the college community for which analyses should control. Next, respondents were presented with an eight-item fan identification measurement scale adapted from Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) evaluation of fan identity associated with collegiate sports. The scale was modified to refer to respondents’ favorite sports team rather than a collegiate team, and the fourth question of the scale, which asks respondents what media they use to consume sports content, was modified to include social media as one of the categories listed in the question. Anchors for response scales are shown in parentheses, and the eight-point fan identification scale included the following items: “How important is it to YOU that your university sports team(s) wins?” (1 = Not Important, 8 = Very Important); “How strongly do YOU see YOURSELF as a fan of your favorite sports team(s)?” (1 = Not At All a Fan, 8 = Very Much a Fan); “How strongly do your FRIENDS see YOU as a fan of your favorite sports team(s)” (1 = Not At All a Fan, 8 = Very Much a Fan); “During the season, how closely do you follow your favorite sports team(s) via any of the following: a) in person or on television, b) on social media, c) on the radio, d) televised news or a newspaper?” (1 = Never, 8 = Almost Every Day); “How important is being a fan of your favorite sports team(s) to YOU?” (1 = Not Important, 8 = Very Important); “How much do YOU dislike your favorite sports’ greatest rivals?” (1 = Do Not Dislike, 8 = Dislike Very Much; reverse coded); “How often do YOU display your favorite team(s) name or insignia at your place of work, where you live, or on your clothing?” (1 = Never, 8 = Always).

Following the fan identity scale, respondents were presented with instructions that detailed a set of tweets that they would be presented with next. The instructions stated: “Next, take a moment to think about your favorite sports team and their biggest rival. On the next screen, you will be shown a series of four tweets authored by either a star player from your
favorite team or a star player from the rival of your favorite team. Take note of the tweet's author, carefully read each tweet, and think about your opinion of the tweet's author.”

Respondents were prompted to click to proceed to view the tweets.

Next, respondents were presented with a set of four tweets. The tweet sets presented to respondents varied in message tone (whether the message in the tweet was a positive or negative message) and group status (whether the author of the tweet was an athlete from a favorite team or a rival team).

After respondents were presented with a tweet set they were presented with a ten-item likeability scale adapted from Reysen (2005). Any reference to physical elements of a brand (e.g., “This person is physically attractive.”) were removed from the scale. Items included: (1) “This person is friendly.”; (2) “This person is likeable.”; (3) “This person is warm.”; (4) “This person is approachable.”; (5) “I would ask this person for advice.”; (6) “I would like this person as a coworker.”; (7) “I would like this person as a roommate.”; (8) “I would like to be friends with this person.”; (9) “This person is similar to me.”; and (10) “This person is knowledgeable.”. Items were rated on a seven-point scale, where 1 = Not at all, and 7 = Extremely.

**Likert Scale Consideration**

Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) fan identification scale is designed as an eight-point Likert scale measure, and Reysen’s (2005) likeability scale is designed with a seven-point Likert scale measure. There was consideration to modify the scale measures into a consistent Likert format. However, the pilot test—which is detailed later in this chapter—provided clear results that enabled the study to proceed with data collection for the main study. In other words, a change to either Likert scale by Wann and Branscombe (1993) or Reysen (2005) was not necessary to collect “clean data” (Meade & Craig, 2012). Therefore, the current analysis could
maintain the integrity of the original scale designs for the survey’s constructive components adapted from Wann and Branscombe (1993) and Reysen (2005).

**Measures Pre-Test**

The *message tone* stimuli (positive and negative tweets) were developed for the purposes of this study, and therefore, it was necessary to investigate their validity. Accordingly, a measures pre-test was carried out among the primary investigator’s peers (*N* = 15). The purpose of the pre-test was to validate the categorization of each message as positive or negative, and to select four positive messages and four negative messages for inclusion in the main study. See Appendix A for the full pre-test survey.

**Measures Pre-Test Procedures**

Using the online survey software Qualtrics, respondents were presented with six messages created by the principle investigator that were intended to be considered as negative and six messages that were intended to be considered as positive for a total of 12 messages. All 12 messages were presented in random order, and participants were not told whether each message was intended to be positive or negative. Respondents were instructed to read each message and rate them on a five-point Likert-type positivity-negativity scale (1 = Very Negative, 2 = Somewhat Negative, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Somewhat Positive, 5 = Very Positive).

**Measures Pre-Test Results**

Descriptive results are presented in Table 1. Results revealed that all negative messages were rated as negative (maximum *M* = 1.80) and all positive messages were rated as positive (minimum *M* = 4.53), supporting the categorization of each message as positive or negative.

**Selection of Stimuli for Main Study**

As the positive/negative categorization of all messages was supported, selection of the
four messages from each category was determined by the extent to which the positive and negative messages were equivalent. To determine the tweets to be included in the main study, centered means were calculated for each message to compare both negative and positive messages against their deviations from a neutral score of three (for negative tweets the centered mean was calculated as $M + 1.50$, and for positive tweets the centered mean was calculated as $M - 1.50$).

Centered means for each message, and indicators of the selected messages are presented in Table 1. The centered mean range for selection negative messages was 3.10 - 3.17, and 3.17 - 3.37 for positive messages. The means of the centered means for the selected negative and positive messages was 3.14 ($SD = 0.88$) and 3.27 ($SD = 0.54$) respectively, which were not significantly different, $t(14) = 0.932, p = .183$. Therefore, these groups were considered to have messages that were equivalently negative and positive, respectively.

Table 1

*Summary of Descriptive Statistics for Measures Pre-Test Stimuli (N = 15)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MESSAGE CONTENTS</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>MIN. VALUE</th>
<th>MAX. VALUE</th>
<th>CENTERED MEAN*</th>
<th>SELECT**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Messages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I don't support our troops, and I don't give money to charity. Why? Because I have freedom of choice and deserve everything I earned and more. #MyLoot&quot;</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;I don't see any women in my sport for a reason; they're not men! Quite trying to be like men. If it worked, you'd be paying in my league too. #NoFeminism&quot;</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"Sports are like war; fans want champions. That makes me pro-violence, just like fans are and want. So, acquit my brothers charged with assault. #DontBeHypocrites"

1.67  0.82  1  4  3.17  X

"I favor my own people; I play to protect my own. I'm mostly cool with teammates who don't cross me. #TruthTellin"

1.60  0.74  1  3  3.10  X

"I won't stand for the anthem. And don't all me "lucky" to play ball; I earned this. Ya, I took food stamps and free housing, but you enslaved us. #HoodPride"

1.67  0.98  1  4  3.17  X

"Media's talking heads are weak, ugly losers. Haters only wish they could be me, play like me, look like me, and think like me. #RespectYourDaddy"

1.60  0.99  1  4  3.10  X

Positive Messages

"Genuine 'thank u' to a stadium of opposing fans who cheered with encouragement for my injured teammate. I respect you so much. #BeyondTheGame"

4.53  1.06  1  5  3.03

"I'm giving all this year's endorsement money to charity working to prevent drunk driving and to family of my teammate who was killed on the road. #InPrayer"

4.67  0.82  2  5  3.17  X

"Inspired by our nation's soldiers; their resolve, resilience, and honor. No"
matters our viewpoints and debates, let's offer kindness and respect to our soldiers. #ThankYou"

"Racial barriers can be overcome. Join me in following America's inspiring tradition of aspiring high and coming together to lift each other up from tragedy. #WhenCalledUpon"

"Different identities help make our incredible country's social quilt beautiful. Let's give love to all, even those who lack empathy and kindness. #OurNobleTradition"

"Let's come together to support and protect victims of abuse of any kind. Let's stand up together and help those in need. Let's make winners of the powerless. #TogetherWeRise"

4.80 0.41  4   5   3.30  X

4.87 0.35  4   5   3.37  X

4.73 0.59  3   5   3.23  X

Notes. * CENTERED MEAN = relative deviations from neutral (3). For negative messages, centered mean = (Mean + 1.50); for positive messages, centered mean = (Mean − 1.50).

** SELECT = messages chosen for inclusion as main study stimuli.

Procedure

This study employed an experiment using a survey measure. The survey was hosted online using Qualtrics, a software that enables researchers to collect location data on respondents. However, IP addresses and geographic coordinates were not collected and respondents’ identity was anonymous throughout the duration of the study. The survey was
distributed through an online link accessible by mobile phone or native/laptop device. Instructors of undergraduate classes agreed to notify students prior to the class during which the survey was administered to bring either a mobile device or laptop if they wished to participate.

After permission was obtained by instructors to conduct a survey in their class, the following announcement was given, which outlines the survey administration procedure:

“I’m speaking to you today to invite you to participate in my research, which investigates perceptions of athletes’ brands in social media. The study consists of a survey that lasts about 15 minutes, in which I’ll ask you to participate. I’m speaking to you today with the permission of your instructor, but please know that your involvement is entirely voluntary. If you wish to participate in another activity, an alternative research assignment is available to you. Simply raise your hand, and your instructor will email you or provide you the voluntary alternative assignment in class. Everyone in this class will receive an email from your instructor with a link to access the survey via the Qualtrics software. For those who would like to participate in the survey, you will follow the link in your email. For anyone who cannot access their email in this class for any reason, a paper copy of the survey is available for you. Simply raise your hand and let me know at the conclusion of this announcement. If you have any questions about the survey at any point, you may simply raise your hand and your instructor or I will try to help you. There is no expected harm associated with this survey. Please also know that no compensation of any kind will be provided by participating in this study. The study is considered completely voluntary. By participating, you will be contributing to research conducted at this great university, which is much appreciated. You may withdraw from the survey or simply decline to participate at no penalty whatsoever. By participating, however, you help advance knowledge involving branding in media, especially in the sports media domain. Thank you in advance for
considering this. I hope you all will join me in an effort to advance knowledge and keep research strong at our university. Together, we can create new possibilities for scholarly work.”

For students who were unable to bring a device, a paper copy of the survey was provided to them by the principal investigator. Paper copies of the survey were collected and included with the electronic/Qualtrics data and kept in a locked cabinet at the private office of the principal investigator. Once the survey was closed, the data were extracted and stored on a password protected external hard drive only accessible by the principal investigator. Data were analyzed using SPSS Statistical Software.

**Analysis**

The following hypotheses and analyses were planned:

**H1**: There will be a significant main effect of fan identification on likeability ratings.

**H2**: There will be a significant main effect of message tone on likeability ratings.

**H3**: There will be a significant main effect of group status on likeability ratings.

**H4**: There will be a significant three-way interaction between fan identification, message tone, and group status.

Planned analyses included conducting a three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA; fan identification X message tone X group status). To conclude that H1, H2, and H3 were supported, a significant main effect at alpha = .05 had to be revealed for each factor. In order to conclude that H4 was supported, a significant three-way interaction at alpha = .05 had to be revealed. If a significant three-way interaction was found, it would be further examined by evaluating the data.
between respondents with high and low fan identification levels. Line graphs would then be produced by plotting likeability ratings on the y-axes and message tone on the x-axes with group status as separate lines.

**Pilot Study**

To assess the main study’s method and measures, a pilot study was conducted among a group of the principle investigator’s peers. A nonprobability sample of 15 students participated in the pilot study, all of whom were drawn from a class in the communications college at the university at which the main study respondents were recruited. The pilot study respondents were sourced after a class announcement by the principal investigator. Following the pilot study, potential changes to the main study were considered based on preliminary analysis of pilot study results, observation of participants’ behavior, and pilot study respondents’ informal feedback.

Based on pilot study observations, a 40-second timer was added on the screen during which respondents were to read the tweet set that they were randomly assigned to evaluate. This survey function was selected from the Qualtrics software options associated with keeping respondents’ attention during participation. Furthermore, this timer selection was deliberately chosen over an option to include extra questions in the survey that gauged respondents’ attentiveness to the survey’s content. The following statement is an example of such a survey placement: “If you are reading this question and paying attention to this survey, mark “Strongly Agree” on the scale.” The principal reason such an attention placement was omitted in place of the timer was to protect the integrity of the survey measures incorporated in the study design, which were adapted directly from established literature cited herein (Reysen, 2005; Wann & Branscombe, 1993).
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Sample Description

The sample consisted of 420 respondents, but eight engagements of the survey measure were considered incomplete and were then excluded from the data analyzed. Thus, the sample included 412 respondents (294 females, 117 males, one preferred not to provide their gender) ranging in age from 18 to 45 years old ($M = 20.35$, $SD = 2.12$). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions. As stated above, eight participants accessed the survey but completed no questions and were therefore removed. Demographic descriptives by condition are shown in Table 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONDITION</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>MIN.</th>
<th>MAX.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ingroup-Positive</td>
<td>101</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20.33</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroup-Negative*</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20.63</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgroup-Positive</td>
<td>103</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20.31</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgroup-Negative</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20.13</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. *One participant preferred not to offer a response for gender.
Scales and Variables

Fan identification, message tone, and group status were computed as described in the pilot study above. Construct variable results were as follows:

Fan identification

Using Cronbach’s alpha, internal reliability of the items tested was acceptable ($\alpha = .92$) with a mean of 5.82 ($SD = 1.64$) and minimum/maximum values of 1.00 and 8.00. The median value was 6.29, which was used as the cut-point to classify respondents as high or low fan identification.

Likeability

Using Cronbach’s alpha, internal reliability of the items tested was good ($\alpha = .99$) with a mean of 3.48 ($SD = 1.99$) and minimum/maximum values of 100 and 7.00. A construct correlation matrix for main study data is presented in Table 3. Each value corresponds to the correlation coefficient between the variable in the given row with the variable in the corresponding column. Asterisks are used in the table to indicate statistical significance in these comparisons at the specified significance levels, although exact p-values are not shown. There appears to be a strong and statistically significant linear correlation between “Likeability” and “Message Tone.” On the contrary, there appears to be a weak and statistically significant linear correlation when comparing “Likeability” vs “Fan identification” and “Group status” vs “Fan identification.”

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct Correlation Matrix (N = 412)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Correlations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A     B     C     D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

83
Fan identification (A) 1.00
Message tone (B) .07 1.00
Group status (C) .11* -.01 1.00
Likeability (D) .12* .82** .06 1.00

* p < .05, ** p < .001

ANOVA Results

A three-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to examine the main effects of fan identification, group status, and message tone on likeability ratings. For each comparison, the mean of squared deviations from the mean was compared to obtain a p-value at a given significance level. Fan identification includes two levels (high and low), group status includes two levels (ingroup and outgroup), and message tone includes two levels (positive and negative), resulting in a 2x2x2 design. Results are reported in Table 4.
Table 4

ANOVA Results and Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High fan identification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroup</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive message</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative message</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgroup</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive message</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative message</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low fan identification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingroup</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive message</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative message</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgroup</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive message</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative message</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fan identification (A)</td>
<td>5.70*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.70</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group status (B)</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message tone (C)</td>
<td>1061.07**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1061.07</td>
<td>852.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A * B * C</td>
<td>6.21*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6.21</td>
<td>4.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A * B</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hypothesis 1 predicted that there would be a significant main effect of fan identification on likeability ratings. Results indicated that the effect of fan identification was significant, $F(1, 404) = 4.56, p = .033$, indicating a significant difference in likeability ratings between those with high fan identification ($M = 3.60, SD = 2.01$) and low ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.96$) fan identification. Therefore, H1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that there would be a significant main effect of message tone on likeability ratings. Results indicated that the effect of message tone was significant, $F(1, 404) = 852.40, p < .001$, indicating a significant difference in likeability ratings between those who are presented with a positive message ($M = 5.13, SD = 1.17$) and those presented with a negative message ($M = 1.85, SD = 1.09$). Therefore, H2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that there would be a significant main effect of group status on likeability ratings. There was no significant effect of group status on likeability ratings, $F(1, 404) = 3.79, p = .052$. Therefore, H3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that there would be a significant three-way interaction between fan identification, message tone, and group status. There was an interaction between fan identification, message tone, and group status, $F(1, 404) = 6.21, p = .026$. Therefore, H4 was supported. The three-way interaction is presented graphically in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interaction</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$SE$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A * C</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B * C</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>502.90</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: $R^2 = .69$, adj. $R^2 = .69$. *$p < .05$, **$p < .001$. 

Hypothesis 1 predicted that there would be a significant main effect of fan identification on likeability ratings. Results indicated that the effect of fan identification was significant, $F(1, 404) = 4.56, p = .033$, indicating a significant difference in likeability ratings between those with high fan identification ($M = 3.60, SD = 2.01$) and low ($M = 3.25, SD = 1.96$) fan identification. Therefore, H1 was supported.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that there would be a significant main effect of message tone on likeability ratings. Results indicated that the effect of message tone was significant, $F(1, 404) = 852.40, p < .001$, indicating a significant difference in likeability ratings between those who are presented with a positive message ($M = 5.13, SD = 1.17$) and those presented with a negative message ($M = 1.85, SD = 1.09$). Therefore, H2 was supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that there would be a significant main effect of group status on likeability ratings. There was no significant effect of group status on likeability ratings, $F(1, 404) = 3.79, p = .052$. Therefore, H3 was not supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that there would be a significant three-way interaction between fan identification, message tone, and group status. There was an interaction between fan identification, message tone, and group status, $F(1, 404) = 6.21, p = .026$. Therefore, H4 was supported. The three-way interaction is presented graphically in Figure 1 and Figure 2.
Figure 2
Estimated marginal means for likeability: Low fan identification

Figure 3
Estimated marginal means for likeability: High fan identification
Given the significant three-way interaction, it was appropriate to examine two-way interactions to explore the research questions in this study. To add clarity to the three-way interaction indicated in H4, two separate simple two-way ANOVA tests were conducted for all three interactions between each level condition of fan identification, group status, and message tone. The simple two-way ANOVA’s consisted of group status and message tone with the high-level and low-level fan identification conditions. Also included were message tone and fan identification with ingroup and outgroup conditions, along with fan identification and group status between positive and negative message tone conditions. This calculation resulted in a significant simple two-way interaction between fan identification and group status with the positive message tone condition $F(1, 404) = 7.47, p = 0.01$. Therefore, supporting the main effects of fan identification and message tone—along with the three-way interaction of fan identification, group status, and message tone—fan identification and group status reveal significance on likeability when the tweet is positive.

Research Question 1 asked whether there would be a significant two-way interaction between fan identification and message tone. There was no significant two-way interaction between fan identification and message tone, $F(1, 404) = .08, p = .774$. Therefore, there was no significant interaction in response to RQ1.

Research Question 2 asked whether there would be a significant two-way interaction between fan identification and group status. There was no significant two-way interaction between fan identification and group status, $F(1, 404) = 2.81, p = .095$. Therefore, there was no significant interaction in response to RQ2.

Research question 3 asked whether there would be a significant two-way interaction between message tone and group status. There was no significant two-way interaction between
message tone and group status, \( F(1, 404) = 0.01, p = .934 \). Therefore, there was no significant interaction in response to RQ3.

**Outcome Figure of Factors Impacting Likeability**

The outcome diagram represents the results and findings from the specific statistical analyses utilized to test the hypotheses and research questions of the current study. The remaining directional arrows, as originally represented in the theoretical diagram, represent significant correlations, main effects, and interactions. Initially, a bivariate correlation was conducted for all three main factors and the outcome variable. Based on the results, the diagram depicts the significant correlations between fan identification and group status, fan identification and likeability, as well as message tone and likeability. Upon conducting the three-way ANOVA, the significant main effects of fan identification and message tone on likeability are represented in the same manner as the bivariate correlations with directional arrows extending from the variables to the outcome variable to represent significance. The significant three-way interaction among fan identification, message tone, and group status is also represented by the directional arrows.

Based on the finding of a significant three-way interaction within the ANOVA, three separate simple two-way ANOVA tests were conducted between each combination of two main effect factors among the two levels of conditions of the third variable. For example, fan identification and group status were examined among positive and negative message tones. Then, fan identification and message tone were examined among ingroup and outgroup status. Finally, message tone and group status were examined among high-level fan identification and low-level fan identification. The only significant interaction was between fan identification and group status among positive message tones, which has a significant interaction with likeability. This is
represented by a combination of linking arrows signaling the interaction of the two main effect factors and the positive message tone by which both factors and the tested condition impacted likeability.

Figure 4: Outcome of Factors Impacting Likeability
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Social media use among athletes and fans provides a rich, dynamic environment for observation and discovery. The results of the current study reveal interacting variables within this media environment that may support new analyses for user communities beyond the college campus. Fans’ perceptions extend beyond sports schools (Nelson & Wechsler, 2003), and athlete branding has more variables to evaluate than the areas of analysis considered herein. Nevertheless, the focus of the current study begins to fill a gap in literature pertaining to brand image perceptions in the universe of social media, sports content, athlete brands, and fan perceptions.

Evaluations of attitudes toward brands and evaluations of perceptions toward brand attributes must consider human brands. A key reason is to acknowledge the presence of an understudied community of individuals interacting in media. Furthermore, scholars can acknowledge an apparent and readily observable communications phenomenon—interactions among online celebrities and fans (Morris & Anderson, 2015). This phenomenon can extend to various platforms and media domains. The current study’s utilization of human branded content as its stimuli provides an example of how sports fans recognize such content as part of their media experience. Meaning, a tweet from a brand persona in sports, which is then received or read by a fan, is not an irregular media occurrence in the current social media environment. As explained in chapter one, this media engagement and interaction is an increasingly common phenomenon in sports media (Pate, Hardin, & Ruihley, 2014). To extend the literature for
research and branding communities, the following chapter provides insight on key findings of the current study, along with theoretical implications, practical implications for the academy, practical implications for industry, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

**Key Findings**

Hypothesis 1 proposes a significant main effect of fan identification on likeability ratings. Examination of means indicates those with higher levels of fan identification are more likely to rate athletes as likeable. This finding suggests distinguishable and irrefutable negative messages are potentially perceived as more likeable as a direct result of fanfare; whereby, high-level fans may share common behavioral tendencies of tolerance, acceptance, or willful ignorance toward harshness, slander, and other signifiers of negative messaging from athletes.

Hypothesis 2 proposes a significant main effect of message tone on likeability ratings. Examination of the means indicates those shown positive tweets by athletes are more likely to rate athletes as likeable compared with those shown negative tweets. While Hypothesis 1 indicates high-level fans (more fervent fans) are potentially more likely to rate athletes as likeable, Hypothesis 2 suggests negative message tone may still impact the outcome of perceived likeability toward the athlete brand. Of course, mean comparisons cannot comprehensively evaluate the impact of interaction effects between variables. Furthermore, these findings may raise caution among public relations practitioners, advertisers, and brand marketers because there is a high likelihood of limitations on how much fan identification can influence a message. In other words, branded content in social media, whether intended as positive or negative, may present more variance than other components. There are many contextual factors in the sports domain pertaining to sports fans’ perceptions that could influence results. Such factors may
include the intensity of one sport team rivalry compared to others (i.e., regional variance) or profile factors pertaining to person’s physical characteristics (e.g., race and attractiveness). For scholars, the findings pertaining to hypothesis 2 should raise testable questions as to the extent each factor (fan identification and message tone) weighs on various branded media. These implications are further explored later in the chapter.

Hypothesis 3 proposes there is a significant main effect of group status on likeability ratings. The current study’s findings cannot conclude whether stimuli from a favorite athlete or rival athlete have a significant impact on their ratings of likeability of the athlete. This could be explained by the difficulty people may have imagining a tweet presented in an experiment coming from a favorite team’s athlete or rival team’s athlete. This speculation is further explored later in the chapter with a recommendation for future studies to conduct a simulation mirroring real-time engagement of a respondent’s personalized social media experience. Recommendations also include constructing stimuli portraying actual team names or athlete names.

Hypothesis 4 addresses the aforementioned hypotheses by exploring interaction between the three independent variables previously considered: fan identification, message tone, and group status. One of the aims of this inquiry is to support future scholarly evaluations of social media users and how they interact with brand personas. Testing interaction effects between the aforementioned variables aim to better explain branding phenomena in sports, which may offer a glimpse into the behavior of sports fans and how branded content in social media intersects with fanfare. Hypothesis 4 proposes there is a significant three-way interaction between fan identification, message tone, and group status. The results suggest the influence of message tone is potentially greater for those who are exposed to an ingroup tweet but only among those considered high-level fans. There is a greater difference in likeability ratings between negative
and positive conditions for ingroup than outgroup, which suggests high-level fans are more partisan and reactionary to tweets from an ingroup or outgroup compared to low-level fans. This is particularly the case when the positive message condition is present for high fan identification and ingroup status. In other words, social media posts from athletes of a favorite team or rival team matter more to high-level fans. This correlation of high-level fanfare and interest toward positive posts from athletes of a favorite team are among the key findings of the current study.

Inquiries of the current study without statistical significance include H3, RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3. However, these outcomes do not render the inquiries as wasteful or useless for future analyses. Research Question 1 gauges if there is a significant two-way interaction between fan identification and message tone. Research Question 2 gauges if there is a significant two-way interaction between fan identification and group status. Research Question 3 gauges if there is any significant interaction between message tone and group status. The only significant interaction revealed is fan identification and group status between positive message tone. This would point towards indications that high-level fans respond favorably to positive messages of athletes from their favorite team.

The lack of significance revealed in H3, RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3 should not deter future scholars from exploring interaction effects between the variables evaluated herein. Several factors could help inform the outcome, which include the following: the specific media environment tested; the experiment design involving fictitious stimuli representing an ingroup (an athlete from a favorite team) and an outgroup (an athlete from a rival team); the respondent pool drawn from a geographic area (southern United States region) potentially limited in generalizability to all college students; and the time period in which data was collected (off season for football). The lack of significance is a key finding in this respect, which should
compel further analysis to verify the lack of interaction and determine if new variables are more appropriate in place of the variables evaluated in the current study.

**Implications**

The current study’s contributions extend beyond the results involving variables analyzed herein. The study design, for example, was constructed to be reproducible for future analyses, and the theoretical components that operationalized the current investigation are distinguishably important. The combination of advancements of the current study—operationalized study design, theoretical constructs, and the investigation’s results—provide the academy and industry new exploratory and explanatory tools. However, such tools may be used for different objectives. Industry practitioners may operate in a separate universe from academic scientific inquiries, as evidenced by the academy’s potential overemphasis of Twitter to explain social media phenomena.

The current study aims to provide the investigatory tools by which future analyses may expand beyond Twitter, which both the academy and industry practitioners may utilize. However, industry may pursue such inquiries more swiftly due to monetary incentive or industriousness meant to keep pace with a dynamic marketplace. Thus, replicability has different functions in two universes for practical implications—and to explain how such implications may formulate—three sections are allocated to explain implications for theory, the academy, and industry. By providing these sections, communities to which the current analysis endeavored to contribute are directly addressed.

**Theoretical Implications**

Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) discuss parallels of a business marketplace and social field. The current study affirms that social entities within a competitive environment
(sports media) offer various brand perceptions. Meaning, athlete brands are not perceived the same among all sports fans, and are therefore potentially valued by likeability, among other observable factors. Underwood, Bond, & Baer (2001) explore such factors, which include brand personality and social identity. Their study reveals emotional connections between customers and brands, which sometimes results in fervent commitment. The current study does not quite gauge emotional resonance with brands, but does indicate how fan intensity and an ingroup status of an athlete can potentially influence brand perceptions. A theoretical implication of the current study is the acknowledgment of the social identity-brand equity (SIBE) model’s relevance in exploring brand perceptions, which Underwood, Bond, & Baer (2001) base their analysis. Furthermore, a theoretical implication of the current study is an affirmation that brand attributes with social components, which are inherent with athlete brands (Carlson & Donavan, 2013) are observable and measurable. This affirmation further validates the results and approach provided by Underwood, Bond, & Baer (2001).

Boyle and Magnusson (2007) also based their analysis on the SIBE model to explore the sports domain. Similarly, Watkins (2014) explored the sports domain to investigate factors impacting the social and human aspects of brands in sports. Both studies by Boyle and Magnusson (2007) and Watkins (2014) substantiated hypotheses in the current study that predict likeability with positive message tone and ingroup status. The results presented in the current analysis support the aforementioned studies’ findings and offer more pathways for future scholars to explore observable variables pertaining to brand perceptions. Such pursuits would affirm Braunstein and Zhang’s (2005) intention to investigate brand attributes in the sports domain, particularly by focusing on athletes as human brands worthy of ratings by sports fans. Furthermore, such ratings may be categorized among sports fans by their own characteristics,
which in the case of the current study involved fan identification (high-level and low-level). The results of the current analysis affirm Braunstein and Zhang’s (2005) operationalizable approach to investigating human athletes among sports fans.

Brand equity refers to the competitive position a brand has in a marketplace (Keller & Aaker, 1998), which includes sports and social media. In various media environments, brands earn consumer-value positions through perceptions of likeability (Nguyen, Melewar, & Chen, 2013), market-value positions through brand awareness (Burnaz & Bilgin, 2011), and staying power [i.e., the ability for a brand to exist during fluctuations in the market (Smith, 2011)]. Included in brand valuations are human brands. Keller and Aaker (1998), and numerous brand equity studies, focus on organizational brands (Bauer, Sauer, & Schmitt, 2005; Biscaia, Ross, Yoshida, Correia, Rosado, & Marôco, 2016; Kerr & Gladden, 2008). This overemphasis on organizational brands has potentially rendered human brands underexplored.

The current study incorporates a term utilized by Herskovitz and Crystal (2010), brand persona, to describe the personification of a brand, which may involve narrative elements to define its media presence. Such elements are also referred to in literature as brand attributes (Cian, 2011). Athletes represent numerous brand personas in social media, which provides an environment with evaluative potential for phenomenological studies. The current study takes an important theoretical step in acknowledging brand personas’ presence in media with the selection of sports athletes as the subjects of experimental stimuli. Athletes’ tweets are shown to respondents with various factors demonstrating human branding and brand personality (Burch et al., 2014).

When considering a brand’s attributes, personality, and influence on the emotions or behavior of external stakeholders [e.g., consumers of a product or fans of an athlete (Jones,
a brand persona represents human qualities. In social media, a human brand is represented by online activity, which helps construct the brand persona (Moulard, Garrity, & Rice, 2015). Factored into this constructive makeup is a medium disseminating messages while serving as a digital element between the direct interpersonal engagement of the intended recipient(s). There are inherent social aspects present in any human being (Archer, 2007), and social media offers a platform for people to engage in communication. The current study’s use of the term, brand persona, incorporates this human aspect of a brand while acknowledging its measurable value in a business marketplace, which may include social media. Furthermore, the incorporation of brand personas in brand value considerations factor opinions, perceptions, and relationships media consumers may develop with a brand (Blackston, Aaker, & Biel, 1993).

In the context of a business marketplace, brand equity describes the competitive position a brand garners relative to its external stakeholders [e.g., shareholders, consumers, and brand evangelists (Parrott, Danbury, & Kanthavanich, 2015)]. Aaker (1991) and Keller (1993) suggest such a competitive position in any marketplace yields measurable brand value. In a human-social context, to assess such value—which can be derived from consumers’ (fans’) perceptions of a brand, among other value assessments (Aaker, 1991)—brand equity would need a new conceptual reference. Meanwhile, the concept must acknowledge the parallel functions of garnering a competitive position relative to its stakeholders. Such stakeholders may include ingroup members (fellow fans of a favorite team) or outgroup members (fans of a rival team) (Burt, 2000). The current study draws on Bourdieu’s (1986) concept, social capital, to explain this human-social parallel to brand equity in a business marketplace. Moreover, the concept of social capital helps explain the social media environment, which has merged the socially competitive tendencies of human interactions (Blease, 2015) with the ingenuity and brand

Therefore, the current study operationalizes a conceptual synthesis of brand equity and social capital to create more scholarly pathways to investigate branding phenomena, particularly when brand personas are the subjects of analysis. As explained, social media is a ripe and dynamic environment where future analyses are encouraged to advance knowledge pertaining to social competition and social mobility in various contexts. In the current study, brand personas (athletes) are associated with several variables to determine a potential impact on likeability. The study design factors a brand persona’s inherently social behavior and its interactions with social media users who are often fans. Such an approach qualifies as an operationalization of the conceptual synthesis; whereby, future scholars may utilize the definitions and explanations offered herein to set up analyses into brand personas engaging in a social environment, particularly a social media environment.

The conceptual synthesis supports the study design incorporated herein while also acknowledging athlete brands, which the literature describes as potential celebrities among fans (Cunningham, 2012) who may garner considerable social capital (Hunter, Burgers, & Davidsson, 2009). By factoring brand equity and social capital into evaluations of the likeability of athlete brands’ tweets, the current study provides a compelling assessment of a brand persona’s potential competitive value on fans. Phua (2012) suggests social networks among fans and followers help define an athlete’s brand impact. The current study acknowledges this reality by focusing on athletes and sports fans in the social media environment, while also extending the literature to gauge how and why such a brand impact takes place.
Thus, the hypotheses and research questions tested in the current study are representative inquiries of the following: a conceptual synthesis that acknowledges brand personas with dualistic functions of marketability [referring to a function of business branding (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013)] and social competition (referring to a social field where human actors compete for social capital) (Gandini, 2016); the sports domain of athletes and fans; theoretical precedent held by SIT to advance inquiries into group status (ingroup/outgroup), social competition, and social mobility among brand personas and interacting communities; and the social media environment where human branding intersects with disseminated messages to various interacting communities, which often involves fans and followers (Ratten, 2015).

Along with the aforementioned theoretical implications, another development from the current study is noteworthy for its intended contribution to branding literature, particularly studies based in SIT—a bolstered definition and use of the term, brand persona. The concept of a brand persona is extended from Herskovitz and Crystal’s (2010) definition to include an actual human, rather than a humanistic descriptor personified through narrative form. The current study provides an implementable term for orienting scholars to a human brand and its personifications in media, particularly media environments with parasocial interactivity (Men & Tsai, 2015). Meanwhile, Herskovitz and Crystal’s (2010) definition remains intact and continues to represent brand personifications of human attributes in media. Ultimately, the aforementioned theoretical contributions are meant to advance knowledge, which may inspire future scholarly works focused on brand personas in media.

**Practical Implications for the Academy**

The current study reveals high-level fans are more likely to rate athletes as likeable. This result is consistent with literature suggesting fan intensity generates a bias toward sports teams
(Harvard & Reams, 2016; Hipperson, 2010). This result also extends the literature by focusing on athletes as the subjects toward whom a high level of fan intensity generates higher likeability. By operationalizing an analysis factoring brand personas in sports (athletes), scholars may better understand emerging fan experiences that interact with athlete brands. Such interactions include social media followership of athletes, online parasocial engagement among sports fans of a particular athlete (Gladden & Funk, 2002; Jahn & Kunz, 2012), and two-way communication with athletes on social media (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

Twitter is considered a communications medium, a real-time news feed, and a branding platform (Andéhn, Kazemina, Lucarelli, & Sevin, 2014). Twitter enables interactions exceeding two-way interactions with various functions such as liking, sharing (on other social media platforms), commenting, retweeting, listing, trending, and favoriting (Wang & Zhou, 2015). Whenever these functions are viewable and engaged by an external public beyond the scope of the two-way interaction between a fan and athlete, the media becomes increasingly social, shareable, and potentially amplified (Wang & Zhou, 2015). The current study’s inclusion of tweets as part of the stimuli shown to respondents reflects the literature acknowledging athlete brands may use Twitter (Hasaan, Karem, Biscaia, & Agyemang, 2016; Watkins & Lee, 2016). The results further validate the presence of athlete brands in social media and sports fans’ engagement with athletes on the platform.

In reviewing the key findings of the current study, the current study found a significant main effect of message tone on likeability ratings, along with the significant main effect of fan identification level on likeability ratings. As previously stated, this means sports fans who are exposed to positive tweets from athletes are more likely to perceive athletes as likeable than sports fans who are exposed to negative tweets. This finding affirms literature suggesting
positive message tone has more brand resonance with consumers (Chen & Kirmani, 2015; Kim & Johnson, 2016). In other words, branded content with a clear message tone may influence buying behavior and have noticeable attitudinal effects like changed opinions (Kim, Wang, Maslowska, & Malthouse, 2016). This may extend beyond sports fanfare, which could provide a potentially fruitful line of inquiry for scholarly research.

As previously stated, the current study does not reveal a significant main effect of group status on likeability ratings. However, there is a three-way interaction between fan identification, message tone, and group status. This finding constitutes new discovery pertaining to the independent variables analyzed in the sports media environment. Moreover, the current study indicates message tone’s influence is potentially greater for those who are exposed to an ingroup tweet but only among those considered high-level fans. Furthermore, the study uncovers positive tweets from ingroup athletes are considered more favorable among high-level sports fans. By uncovering interaction effects in sports media pertaining to fans’ perceptions of likeability, the current study enables communication scholars to more readily evaluate group status among brand personas. There are numerous areas where ingroup and outgroup evaluations apply in the sports domain, which may extend beyond Twitter, social media, or fan perceptions of athlete brands. Inquiries in these areas may continue to advance SIT and branding literature.

**Practical Implications for Industry**

Along with increased explanatory power and foundational pathways by which scholars may advance SIT analyses to include brand personas, the current study’s operationalization may inspire industry practitioners to further evaluate constructive principles of brand messaging. In other words, an increase of knowledge and information for how branded content is perceived
among sports fans enables industry practitioners to strategically curate content for desired outcomes. Such endeavors could potentially raise the brand value of their associated clients.

Raised brand value from a brand persona may result in an increase in brand awareness for a sports franchise, which has historically shown an inverse relationship. The literature mostly acknowledges how a team amplifies athletes rather than how athletes may amplify a team (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Madrigal, 2000). The current study’s findings suggest an athlete’s brand influence, propelled by social media and a highly-engaged community of followers (Clavio & Kian, 2010), may generate brand perceptions previously attributed to organizations. Thus, in a scenario where an athlete endorses a product, brand marketers may better construct messages and product placement with the knowledge that an athlete could potentially drive sales or increase product exposure beyond a sports franchise or associated organization. This new knowledge and strategic branding approach may result in an increased focus on endorsements by brand personas without brand dilution (Roudbari, Elahi, & Yazdi, 2016) or reliance on an athlete’s sports team associated with the endorsement.

Based on the current study’s results, people who identify as sports fans to a greater degree also find athletes more likeable. Furthermore, the results suggest fan identification and group status may influence likeability when tweets are positive. For public relations practitioners, advertisers, and brand marketers, future branding campaigns may more effectively target sports fans. In a product endorsement scenario, or in a scenario where an athlete aims to inspire purchase behavior among a public, the need to qualify the receivers of the athlete’s message as sports fans become more pertinent. Whether the receivers of such messages are streaming, listening, reading, engaging online, or participating in another iteration of media consumption, the receivers who self-identify as sports fans become a valuable target. This
targeted approach may increase efficiency in branding efforts, depending on the branding aims of industry practitioners. Alternatively, the necessity to target sports fans may inspire laborious screening tactics to identify sports fans from those who are void of any interest in sports.

Results from the current study suggest people who are exposed to positive social media content from athletes are more likely to perceive athletes as likeable compared with people exposed to negative social media content. Sports marketers and agents who aim to boost the brand value of their client can frame content in a positive message tone and aggressively disseminate the message. One of the current study’s pre-tests qualifies message tone by asking sports fans to rate the level of positively and negativity of each tweet. A similar approach would be necessary for industry practitioners to distinguish positive and negative social media content. Otherwise, content constructed for positive framing could be misinterpreted as negative and potentially damage an athlete’s brand.

The significant three-way interaction of fan identification, message tone, and group status identified in the current study provides a pathway for industry practitioners to target brand messages. Targeting may refer to several instances where brand messages aim to influence or reach a community of people who are defined for a specific objective (e.g., increased brand awareness, increased sales, or change in brand perceptions). Such instances may include micro-targeting, which involves a small or unique population among a broader consumer marketplace (Shi-Nash, 2015). Another instance may include meticulous profiling, which involves identifying specific attributes of a consumer’s interests and behavior to qualify as a target (Shi-Nash, 2015). This is also referred to as hyper-personalization (Hipperson, 2010).

In either scenario, industry practitioners may pursue data sourcing to accomplish their objectives, which is the calculated or algorithmic approach to mining through digital information.
pertaining to active consumers and potential consumers (Shi-Nash, 2015). This approach aims to narrow down a target community for specific messages considered most conducive or receptive for the target demographic and the desired outcome of the branding campaign. Due to the multivariate makeup of a three-way interaction effect, data mining and digital sourcing (Andrejevic, 2015) could be plausible methods by which industry practitioners may reach relevant demographics. This approach would enable personalized targeting to active consumers and potential consumers, particularly in the online and mobile space (Kumar & Gupta, 2016).

Customization of advertising is an emerging phenomenon (O’Donnell & Cramer, 2015), which is spurred by behavioral patterns and consumer preferences considered high in validity, testable, and verifiable.

The current research’s study design provides a thorough analysis of secondary data (literature review), statistical tests, and multivariate approach to inquiry. This detailed investigation aims to provide methodological tools for the academy and industry. To advance knowledge and effectively uncover branding phenomena in media, more studies are recommended to expand the scope of discovery offered by the research included herein. This recommendation is posited, in part, due to inherent limitations of the study design and a necessity to advance timely and relevant research.

**Reflexivity**

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest studies are influenced by “experiences, desires, interests, and opportunities” (p. 65) of the researchers who initiate and execute investigations. With an acknowledgment of these influences, it must be stated that the focus on sports media is attributable to the principal researcher’s appreciation for sports, along with a scientific interest in exploring sports fans’ perceptions of brand value in media. Finlay (2002) offers a compelling
argument that introspection among researchers enables a more honest and caring approach to research subjects. Since the current study includes survey method, special attention is applied to exclude any proctor biases or sentiments in the rhetoric of the questions posed to respondents. The studies adapted to formulate the survey are incorporated to reinforce unbiased inquiries.

It should be noted that an attempt to pursue a holistically objective investigation is incongruent with the motivation that prompted the study, which is to contribute to communications literature by further establishing concepts related to human brands while increasing knowledge of how athlete brands are perceived in social media. The principal investigator of the current study is not considered an athlete but is considered a high-level sports fan when referring to Wann and Branscombe’s (1993) fan identity scale measures. Furthermore, mentors and colleagues who may influence the construction of the current study are presumed sports fans. Rather than screening for fanfare sentiments among the research community, it is an assumed fait accompli that anyone in the university environment with such a widely-celebrated sports culture (Nelson & Wechsler, 2003; Xiao-feng, 2003; Yang & Gong, 2001) is influenced by fanfare behavior and sports media consumption. After all, this environmental awareness is partially what qualifies the survey respondents as sports media consumers, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Thus, future replications of this study or research in this domain should consider controlling for university sports culture or fanfare.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The current study provides a serviceable approach for decoding communications phenomena pertaining to brand perceptions in sports media. However, this research is most fitting for near-term marketplace discovery. Ten years prior to data collection for the current analysis, social media had a drastically different landscape (Kumar & Gupta, 2016). There were
exponentially fewer sports fans engaged in social networking sites, and prominent platforms like Twitter were not yet publicly active or available in its current format. Looking ahead, the future of social media may have as much dynamism as the previous decade.

The world’s population is increasingly engaged in online communities (Statista, 2016), and sports fanfare continues to grow (Gallup, 2016). These parallel increases suggest the current research’s findings are potentially limited to a short timeframe that prescribes renewed inquiry alongside the seemingly inevitable evolution and growth of social media, fanfare, and sports branding. Throughout such inquiries, more variables should be considered along with replicable studies of the variables considered herein. Thus, future research is recommended that factors an ever-changing social media universe (Weller, 2015). Such research may uncover interesting and potentially fruitful formations of evolving sports fan behavior and athlete brand behavior online. Longitudinal studies may serve as appropriate studies to decode such phenomena.

The current research’s focus on group status, message tone, and fan identification to gauge likeability only encompass a small fraction of the many components observably accessible in sports media phenomena, particularly pertaining to brand perceptions from sports fans of athletes’ social media posts. While the current research is considerably ambitious in its multivariate analysis to gauge likeability, this psychographic status among sports fans is only one status among potentially hundreds worthier of evaluation. Social media, as part of an “attention economy” (Marwick, 2015), functions as an interactive content-driver where brands provoke followership and various reactions from media consumers (Maceli, 2016). Likeability, along with other emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral statuses are potentially impacted by these provocations (Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016). Thus, a deeper dive into how perceptions are formulated may add necessary context for the current study’s findings, while also
supporting future research endeavors that aim to explore new variables of the topics evaluated herein.

To conduct parsimonious and methodologically sound research, the current study has an intentionally narrow focus considering the apparently wide spectrum of sports fans’ reactions to social media posts. By simply logging into Twitter and following any trend, this wide spectrum will undoubtedly formulate. Beyond Twitter, however, there are various social media environments claiming distinct user communities, which may yield various reactions from sports fans when exposed to posts from brand personas (Meng, Stavros, & Westberg, 2015). This variance may render the current research’s findings limited in its generalizability across the broader social media universe. Nevertheless, the current study offers an operationalizable approach for researching unexplored environments. This is, perhaps, the most serviceable contribution of the current analysis. However, the current study’s blueprint for research may necessitate adjustments when factoring effects of group status on likeability ratings. Such an adjustment would require a simulation of social media use for sports fans, rather than an experiment using a survey measure.

Sports fans who engage social media content often receive messages through a personalized feed without any prompt from a researcher. Conversely, formal research prompting sports fans to engage Qualtrics software (after listening to disclosure language approved by an institutional review board) deviates from the aforementioned authentic social media experience. Future studies should aim to simulate “typical” or realistic social media engagement. In the current study, the tweets shown to respondents are static images presented through an experiment using a survey measure. Such content is void of trends and push notices that may attract users to Twitter. Therefore, future analyses are advised to conduct an experiment that presents social
media activity through an active social media feed. Such an approach will more closely resemble sports fans’ typical engagement behavior prompted by Twitter’s platform functionality.

This suggested simulation approach incorporates more authentic ingroup and outgroup experiences in social media. For example, sports fans who engage Twitter may follow an athlete and consume their messages. These sports fans are potentially more impacted by group status than the current study’s results indicate. Thus, future research may qualify respondents by asking if they actively follow athletes in social media. Previous literature suggests sports fans who actively follow their favorite sports team in social media are less likely to seek out messages from rival teams (Bee & Dalakas, 2015; Biscaia, Correia, Rosado, Ross, & Maroco, 2013). Thus, the disparity of ingroup and outgroup messages consumed by sports fans could spur more dramatic reactions than the current study if further evaluated.

The current study’s results involving sports fans’ propensity to favor athletes’ messages, whether they associate with an ingroup or outgroup of the athlete portrayed, may be transferrable to several social media platforms. Future inquiries are recommended for various social media platforms as a comparative study to determine if the platform included in the current study’s stimuli creates any impact on brand perceptions. Before pursuing such research, scholars should acknowledge the customizable experience offered by social media (Daugherty, Eastin, & Bright, 2008). Personalization of social media use enables sports fans to have control of the content to which they are exposed. The experiment conducted in the current study chooses content for the respondent, which may provoke reactions less representative of more authentic experiences of social media use. The static tweets presented in the study design herein offer randomized conditions, which expose many respondents to outgroups without their intention to receive such
messages. This outgroup exposure is potentially atypical of a sports fans’ active engagement in social media.

Hypothesis 3 posits there is a significant main effect of group status on likeability ratings. As explored earlier in the chapter, the current study does not find a significant main effect of group status on likeability ratings, which could be explained by respondents’ difficulty in imagining tweets in the stimuli as attributable to an athlete of their favorite team (ingroup) or an athlete of their rival team (outgroup). When the experiment in the current study presents tweets in either condition of group status (ingroup or outgroup), the respondents have full knowledge and awareness of their participation in an experiment using a survey measure. Thus, their exposure to tweets is considerably inauthentic and impersonal. Ultimately, the active experience of engaging social media is lost in the current study’s methodological approach. Overall, this inquiry may demonstrate the testability limits of social media regarding the artificiality of experimental design.

The stimuli of the current study do present well-curated formatting and characteristics to represent tweets from athletes, and the tweets are constructed to resemble authentic athlete tweets. However, the manner in which the experiment is conducted precludes a social media user from believing the stimuli represents a real-time, authentic social media post. Nevertheless, the content of the tweet prompts reactions and brand perceptions from the sports fans, which are addressed in other hypotheses. Despite the valuable measures provided by respondents in the current study, the artificiality of an experiment design using a survey measure renders Hypothesis 3 less implementable without a more dynamic, real-time simulation.

Furthermore, actual team names and athlete names were not included in the tweet stimuli. If such data were included, respondent data may have presented different results. Fervent fans of
a particular sports team or athlete portrayed in the tweet stimuli could have intensified perceptions. The current study’s stimuli may have served as a dispiriting or neutral element in rousing emotions and reactions from respondents. Future analyses could incorporate actual team names and athlete names and re-test hypotheses 3. Such known entities for sports fans may present different results for hypothesis 3 regarding a main effect of group status on likeability ratings.

Hypothesis 3 presents other inherent limitations regarding tweet depictions. For example, the stimuli of the current study depict athlete images as racially neutral. This means the personas portrayed in the tweets have few distinguishable racial characteristics. An athlete presented with more noticeable racial traits may enable more in-depth understanding of brand perceptions while adding another important variable of consideration. Furthermore, the current study’s stimuli depict male athletes, which is not representative of the universe of athlete brands in social media. Finally, the athletes depicted in the stimuli have no distinguishable age characteristics, which may create a lack of group status signaling. Age group, as a group identity construct relevant to social identity theory, could factor into brand perceptions from respondents who are mostly college age (M = 20.35, SD = 2.12).

As commonly acknowledged in the academy, convenience sampling presents challenges with generalizability (Pruchno et al., 2008). To mitigate this challenge, the current study intentionally focuses on college students’ sports fanfare and factors the respondents’ heavy exposure to sports media content as a byproduct of their attendance at a sports school (Nelson & Wechsler, 2003; Xiao-feng, 2003; Yang & Gong, 2001). Nevertheless, sports schools are a minority in the broader population of higher education. In the United States, for example, there are roughly 5,300 colleges and universities, and many of them have more emphasis on academic
pursuits and career advancement than sports branding and social gatherings around sporting events (The Washington Post, 2015). Therefore, future studies are recommended to extend the current analysis to demographics beyond the convenience sample considered herein.

**Conclusion**

The body of literature focused on brand perceptions in sports emphasizes organizational brands (e.g., sports teams and sports franchises) and their relationships with fans (Bauer, Stokburger-Sauer, & Exler, 2008; Madrigal, 2000). The current study acknowledges these relationships and includes social media as a specific area where fan relationships are expressed through followership and media consumption (Clavio & Kian, 2010). As of 2015, roughly 90 percent of adults in the United States from the ages of 18 to 29 were actively engaged in social media (Pew Research Center, 2015). Among these platforms, Twitter is a prominent media space where sports fans interact (Smith & Sanderson, 2015). However, the current study acknowledges the necessity for future research to explore brand perceptions among sports fans in multiple social media landscapes.

Along the myriad of organizational brands engaging Twitter, the platform is distinctly known for its presence of people. In other words, the platform is commonly associated with individual, human operators (accounts) (Steiger, Westerholt, Resch, & Zipf, 2015). With much of sports branding studies focused on organizations, an apparent phenomenon in sports branding is potentially overlooked and understudied—the brand persona. With 90 percent of Americans engaged in some form of sports consumption (CBSNews.com, 2014), and an increasing sports media presence around the world (Forbes, 2014), social media provides a conducive environment for athlete brands to compete for brand equity in a competitive marketplace (Walsh & Williams,
2016). The current study addresses this competitive element by drawing parallels to a business
marketplace and social field (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012).

In a business context for communications media and sports fanfare, social media
represents a competitive marketplace and opportunistic landscape where increased attention and
followership may garner increased purchase behavior from consumers (Aaker, 1991; Keller,
1993; Godey et al., 2016). In a social context, social media represents an online community
where popularity is observably competitive through public account followership numbers (Wang
& Zhou, 2015). This popularity also serves as a digital communications pulpit to express
attributes, opinions, information, creativity, reactions, and other forms of expressive human
interaction (Ekström & Östman, 2015). Human brands are prevalent in this expressively and
informationally rich environment. To advance research focusing on this distinct community’s
presence in the sports domain, while gauging opinions of sports fans’ reactions to their messages,
the current study incorporates the term, brand persona.

Within the past twenty years, an academic study identified 83 percent of North American
men as sports fans (Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, End, & Jacquemotte, 2000, p. 224). Social media use
among sports fans and the broader population of the world is expected to expand (Yang, 2015).
This combination of market projections creates an imperative for considering the current study’s
results as a precursor for future research, rather than a snapshot time capsule of the media
environment relative to human branding. This area of research should be ongoing, replicable, and
sequential with the aim of evolving alongside an active and seemingly unruly social media
universe (Faklaris & Hook, 2016).

The current study’s results should serve as an enabling asset for communication and
media scholars, as well as industry practitioners. The study design and results herein provide an
operationalizable and adaptable approach to evaluating fan perceptions of brand personas and how they potentially interact or impact their media environment. The current study also contributes to the research community and brand marketing community by advancing knowledge in an economically and socially dynamic media space.

The current study extends the definition of a brand persona from Herskovitz and Crystal’s (2010) analysis to include human brands. Their study’s definition details personifications of brands involving humanistic qualities presented in narrative form to media consumers. For the current analysis, the brand persona encompasses two critical components, which are relevant for operationalizing investigations in the sports media domain pertaining to human brands—brand equity and social capital. A synthesis of these concepts provides necessary explanatory power and operationalizable tools for the current research to investigate sports fans’ reactions to social media content from athlete brands. Furthermore, the conceptual synthesis acknowledges parallel functions of competitive behavior and brand valuations between the aforementioned business context and social context of social media.

Social identity theory (SIT) provides the theoretical foundation on which the conceptual synthesis applies. SIT also serves as a fundamental theory for advancing an analysis on human branding phenomena in sports media pertaining to fan identification and group status. The theory’s seminal authors, Tajfel and Turner (1986) explain that individuals perceive social groups hierarchically and will compete for upward mobility or create group biases to reinforce value in their social position. Such biases are often rooted in group membership, which can translate to fan intensity in the sports domain (Harvard & Reams, 2016). Bourdieu (1986) refers to the means by which an individual pursues social leverage in a competitive environment as a process of obtaining social capital. This distinctively competitive behavior contributes to ingroup
and outgroup ambitions (Parks-Yancy, DiTomaso, & Post, 2005), social competition, and social mobility (Haslam et al., 2010)).

The conceptual synthesis offered herein acknowledges the intersection of business and social marketplaces in sports media, particularly in social media. Furthermore, the conceptual synthesis provides a pathway for brand personas to function as subjects of analysis alongside media consumers (sports fans). Additionally, the conceptual synthesis of the current study bolsters explanatory power by drawing from two established concepts, brand equity and social capital, which have parallel descriptors for evaluating competitive behavior. Moreover, SIT provides the scholarly precedent to factor relevant human components of branding, which include social competition and social mobility in media environments (Clavio & Zimmerman, 2012). Finally, the current study investigates sports fans’ perceptions of media content attributed to brand personas in sports by measuring several variables’ effect on likeability. In simpler terms, the current study successfully operationalizes an investigation of sports fans’ brand perceptions of brand personas.

Variables tested for their effect on likeability include group status (ingroup/outgroup), message tone (negative/positive), and fan identification (high-level/low-level). The results of the current study offer promising insight pertaining to sports fans’ perceptions on athlete brands. Through statistical analysis, the previous chapter demonstrates how an athlete from a favorite team of a sports fan (ingroup) can produce a message, whether positive or negative, and generate more likeability among sports fans than an opposing team’s athlete. Thus, the valence between positive or negative message tone has less of an impact on a sports fans’ perception than the group status to which the athlete belongs. Another result of the current study indicates a significant three-way interaction between fan identification, message tone, and group status. This
outcome suggests likeability increases when a positive tweet from an ingroup membership (favorite sports team) is shown to a high-level fan.

The academic implications of the current study’s findings include an increased understanding of fan perceptions and branding phenomena in social media pertaining to the sports domain. New lines of inquiry may build upon findings of the current analysis regarding positive message tone’s and sports fanfare’s potential influence on consumers’ opinions of likeability. Furthermore, interaction effects between dependent variables considered herein (group status, message tone, and fan identification), offer an opportunity for future studies to test new communities and media domains for comparative analysis.

The theoretical implications include a contribution to SIT literature involving group status evaluations of sports fans in social media. Furthermore, the term, brand persona, has been bolstered to include human brands in sports media, and the conceptual synthesis of brand equity and social capital provides explanatory tools to expand research pertaining to brand perceptions in social media. Future studies may incorporate the aforementioned theoretical developments to operationalize analyses in new, unexplored social media environments. As recommended, new SIT investigations should extend beyond Twitter to include the broader social media universe.

The current study’s operationalization provides scholars and industry practitioners a blueprint to evaluate branding phenomena in social environments involving brand personas and interactive, online media. The current study’s findings provide a qualifier for industry practitioners to increase endorsement activity from brand personas without brand associations from organizations [e.g., an athlete brand endorsing a merchandise product with their sports team’s brand associated with the endorsement (Auerbach, 2005)]. Furthermore, the findings offered herein may justify increased targeting of specific demographics for branding campaigns.
Such endeavors are recommended to include due diligence in verifying intended interpretations of branded content. This may involve pre-testing message tone (which the current study performs) to verify its intended effect on media consumers.

The variables tested in the current study, along with the theoretical contributions to support the analysis, provide a methodological approach by which future studies may advance knowledge in an ever-evolving social media realm (Swatman, Krueger, & Van Der Beek, 2006). The current study addresses several topics intersecting in competitive marketplaces, which include sports media, fan identification, group membership, message tone, social media, and brand personas. SIT concepts like social competition and social mobility help inform the aforementioned topics, while a conceptual synthesis of brand equity and social capital—along with a bolstered definition of a brand persona—provide the necessary context to define the media environment and subjects of analysis.

The aforementioned theoretical tools are recommended for future studies offering simulations constructed in an authentic, interactive social media experience for respondents. Such endeavors may yield results offering increased understanding and viable comparative findings to evaluate the current study. Furthermore, such experiments may replicate the variables tested herein, and expand upon the current study’s inquiries to include new variables observable within social media. Finally, new communities of respondents are recommended, which should extend beyond the convenience sample of a sports school. This recommendation factors a world heavily populated with sports fans (Stanfill & Valdivia, 2017).

Social media is projected to evolve and expand in the next decade (Faklaris & Hook, 2016). The sports marketplace also indicates a projected increase in media consumption and fan engagement (Forbes, 2014). With the world’s population estimated at roughly 7 billion
inhabitants (Smith, 2017), sports and media consumption may offer one of the most salient intersections of competitive environments where human brands and fans interact. Platforms like Twitter, while relevant and observable for the current analysis, represent a fraction of the media universe where athlete brands engage sports fans. Furthermore, new platforms are emerging (Ariel & Avidar, 2015) meriting further exploration and new definitions to provide the explanatory power for discovery to advance.

Social media’s increasing popularity in the sports domain presents an immediately relevant space to advance knowledge on brand perceptions among sports fans. The evolving landscape of social media and athlete brands (Hodge & Walker, 2015) also presents a fruitful area of research and discovery for future scholars, brand marketers, public relations practitioners, and advertisers. In this media universe, human brands are becoming increasingly prevalent, which in the context of sports fanfare, may include millions of followers of an athlete brand (Arai, Ko, & Ross, 2014). Thus, research in this space is critical for understanding sports fans’ perceptions of human brands.

Moreover, increased understanding in this space may unlock unforeseen potential amounting to billions of dollars of transactions among media consumers and brands. This outcome is plausible considering the vast scope of the sports marketplace and projected growth described in the current study. Looking beyond the business incentive for analysis, an increased understanding of this dynamic environment may decode the constructive principles of branding phenomena in various communications realms. In so doing, scholars have an opportunity to extend the current study’s efforts to contribute serviceable and adaptable methodological tools. Such tools may be used to decode social media and branding phenomena for the present era and for future generations of communication scholars and industry practitioners.
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APPENDIX A

Measures Pre-Test Survey

On the next screen you will be presented with several tweets. You will be asked to read each tweet and rate them based on whether you think the message in each tweet is negative, neutral, or positive.

Click >> when you are ready to view the tweets.

(Prompted prior to each tweet) Please read the message in this tweet. Would you rate the message as being a negative, neutral, or positive message?

(Scale: Very Negative, Somewhat Negative, Neutral, Somewhat Positive, Very Positive)

(Tweets presented in random order)

**Favorite Team Athlete**
@favoriteteamathlete

I'm giving all this year's endorsement money to charity working to prevent drunk driving and to family of my teammate who was killed on the road. #InPrayer

**Favorite Team Athlete**
@favoriteteamathlete

Genuine 'thank u' to a stadium of opposing fans who cheered with encouragement for my injured teammate. I respect you so much. #BeyondTheGame
Favorite Team Athlete
@favoriteteamathlete

Racial barriers can be overcome. Join me in following America's inspiring tradition of aspiring high and coming together to lift each other up from tragedy. #WhenCalledUpon

Favorite Team Athlete
@favoriteteamathlete

Inspired by our nation's soldiers; their resolve, resilience, and honor. No matter our viewpoints and debates, let's offer kindness and respect to our soldiers. #ThankYou

Favorite Team Athlete
@favoriteteamathlete

I favor my own people; I play to protect my own. Call me racist; I don't care. I'm mostly cool with teammates who don't cross me. #TruthTellin

Favorite Team Athlete
@favoriteteamathlete

Sports are like war; fans want champions. That makes me pro-violence, just like fans are and want. So, acquit my brothers charged with assault. #DontBeHypocrites

Favorite Team Athlete
@favoriteteamathlete

Media's talking heads are weak, ugly losers. Haters only wish they could be me, play like me, look like me, and think like me. #RespectYourDaddy

Favorite Team Athlete
@favoriteteamathlete

Different identities help make our incredible country's social quilt beautiful. Let's give love to all, even those who lack empathy and kindness. #OurNobleTradition
Favorite Team Athlete
@favoritemymathlete

I won't stand for the anthem. And don't call me “lucky” to play ball; I earned this. Ya, I took food stamps and free housing, but you enslaved us. #HoodPride

Favorite Team Athlete
@favoritemymathlete

I don't see any women in my sport for a reason; they're not men! Quit trying to be like men. If it worked, you'd be playing in my league too. #NoFeminism

Favorite Team Athlete
@favoritemymathlete

I don't support our troops, and I don't give money to charity. Why? Because I have freedom of choice and deserve everything I earned and more. #MyLoot
APPENDIX B

Main Study Survey Instrument

DEMOGRAPHICS

D1) Please specify your age in numeric years (i.e., 20)

D2) Please specify the gender with which you are most comfortable associating.

- Male
- Female
- Other

FAN IDENTIFICATION SCALE

For the following questions, whenever there is a reference to a “sports team”, this may include one sports team, or several. In other words, this may apply to the football team, or several sports teams (e.g., basketball, volleyball, baseball, etc.).

(Scale: 1 = Not Important, 8 = Very Important)

F1) How important is it to YOU that your favorite sports team(s) wins?

F2) How strongly do YOU see YOURSELF as a fan of your favorite sports team(s)?

F3) How strongly do your FRIENDS see YOU as a fan of your favorite sports team(s)?

F4) During the season, how closely do you follow your favorite sports team(s) via ANY of the following: a) in person or on television, b) on social media, c) on the radio, d) televised news or a newspaper?

F5) How important is being a fan of your favorite sports team(s) to YOU?

F6) How much do YOU dislike your favorite sports team's greatest rivals?
F7) How often do YOU display your favorite team's name or insignia at your place of work, where you live, or on your clothing?

**TWEET STIMULI – INSTRUCTIONS**

Next, take a moment to think about your favorite sports team and their biggest rival. On the next screen you will be shown a series of four tweets authored by either a star player from your favorite team, or a star player from the rival of your favorite team. Take note of the tweet's author, carefully read each tweet, and think about your opinion of the tweet's author. Click >> to see the tweets.

**TWEET STIMULI – CONDITIONS**

*(Respondents randomly presented with one of the following four stimuli)*

**CONDITION 1: In-Group, Negative Message**

Take note of the tweet's author, carefully read each tweet, and think about your opinion of the tweet's author. Click below when you are ready to move on.
Favorite Team Athlete
@favoriteteamathlete

Sports are like war; fans want champions. That makes me pro-violence, just like fans are and want. So, acquit my brothers charged with assault. #DontBeHypocrites

Favorite Team Athlete
@favoriteteamathlete

I favor my own people; I play to protect my own. Call me racist; I don’t care. I’m mostly cool with teammates who don’t cross me. #TruthTellin

Favorite Team Athlete
@favoriteteamathlete

I won’t stand for the anthem. And don’t call me “lucky” to play ball; I earned this. Ya, I took food stamps and free housing, but you enslaved us. #HoodPrido

Favorite Team Athlete
@favoriteteamathlete

Media’s talking heads are weak, ugly losers. Haters only wish they could be me, play like me, look like me, and think like me. #RespectYourDaddy
CONDITION 2: In-Group, Positive Message

Take note of the tweet's author, carefully read each tweet, and think about your opinion of the tweet's author. Click below when you are ready to move on.

**Favorite Team Athlete**  
@favoriteteamathlete

I'm giving all this year's endorsement money to charity working to prevent drunk driving and to family of my teammate who was killed on the road. #InPrayer

**Favorite Team Athlete**  
@favoriteteamathlete

Racial barriers can be overcome. Join me in following America’s inspiring tradition of aspiring high and coming together to lift each other up from tragedy. #WhenCalledUpon

**Favorite Team Athlete**  
@favoriteteamathlete

Different identities help make our incredible country’s social quilt beautiful. Let’s give love to all, even those who lack empathy and kindness. #OurNobleTradition

**Favorite Team Athlete**  
@favoriteteamathlete

Let's come together to support and protect victims of abuse of any kind. Let's stand up together and help those in need. Let's make winners of the powerless. #TogetherWeRise
CONDITION 3: Out-Group, Negative Message

Take note of the tweet's author, carefully read each tweet, and think about your opinion of the tweet's author. Click below when you are ready to move on.

**Rival Team Athlete**
@rivalteamathlete

Sports are like war; fans want champions. That makes me pro-violence, just like fans are and want. So, acquit my brothers charged with assault. #DontBeHypocrites

**Rival Team Athlete**
@rivalteamathlete

I favor my own people; I play to protect my own. Call me racist; I don’t care. I’m mostly cool with teammates who don’t cross me. #TruthTellin

**Rival Team Athlete**
@rivalteamathlete

I won’t stand for the anthem. And don’t call me “lucky” to play ball; I earned this. Ya, I took food stamps and free housing, but you enslaved us. #HoodPride

**Rival Team Athlete**
@rivalteamathlete

Media’s talking heads are weak, ugly losers. Haters only wish they could be me, play like me, look like me, and think like me. #RespectYourDaddy
CONDITION 4: Out-Group, Positive Message

Take note of the tweet's author, carefully read each tweet, and think about your opinion of the tweet's author. Click below when you are ready to move on.

Rival Team Athlete  
@rivalteamathlete
I'm giving all this year's endorsement money to charity working to prevent drunk driving and to family of my teammate who was killed on the road. #InPrayer

Rival Team Athlete  
@rivalteamathlete
Racial barriers can be overcome. Join me in following America's inspiring tradition of aspiring high and coming together to lift each other up from tragedy. #WhenCalledUpon

Rival Team Athlete  
@rivalteamathlete
Different identities help make our incredible country's social quilt beautiful. Let's give love to all, even those who lack empathy and kindness. #OurNobleTradition

Rival Team Athlete  
@rivalteamathlete
Let's come together to support and protect victims of abuse of any kind. Let's stand up together and help those in need. Let's make winners of the powerless. #TogetherWeRise

Click to move on once you have reviewed the tweets (after at least 40 seconds).
- I'm ready to move on (option appeared after 40 seconds)
LIKEABILITY SCALE

Thinking about your opinions of the author of the tweets you just read, please rate the following statements.

(Scale: 1 = Not at all, 7 = Extremely)

L1) This person is friendly.

L2) This person is likable.

L3) This person is warm.

L4) This person is approachable.

L5) I would ask this person for advice.

L6) I would like this person as a coworker.

L7) I would like this person as a roommate.

L8) I would like to be friends with this person.

L9) This person is similar to me.

L10) This person is knowledgeable.
APPENDIX C

IRB Approval

February 6, 2017

Brandon Chioeotky
CCIS
Box 870172


Dear Mr. Chioeotky:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of written documentation of informed consent. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies

Your application will expire on February 5, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent/assent forms to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,
Consent Form
Online Survey

Mixed methods: Questionnaire of Students; Interviews of Student Athletes Consent Form

PI: Brandon Chicotsky
Co-PI: Andrew Billings
The College of Communication and Information
Sciences at The University of Alabama
brandon@chicotsky.com
817-800-1798

You are invited to take part in a research study about the perception of athletes’ brands.

What the study is about:
The study investigates perceptions of collegiate athletes’ brands in social media through a survey of students, sports fans and non-sports fan.

What you will be asked to do: You will be asked a series of online survey questions to ascertain your perceptions of athlete’s brands. You will be asked questions like, ‘How important is being a fan of your university’s sports team(s) to YOU?’

Time involvement: Your participation in this research will take approximately 15-20 minutes.

Risks and benefits: There are no anticipated risks to you if you participate in this study. However, participation will contribute to your college’s research. Furthermore, you will be part of advancing knowledge in an increasingly apparent phenomenon, athlete brands in social media.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to be in the study you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You have the option to skip any questions and participate in only some tasks as appropriate to the study. Participating in this study does not mean that you are giving up any of your legal rights.

Your answers will be confidential: The records of this study will be kept private. Identities will remain anonymous throughout the data collection and reporting of the study. Once the survey is closed, a data report will be run, extracted, and stored on a password protected external hard drive held on campus and only accessible to the principal investigator of the current study. Records will then be destroyed at the end of the research study. Any report of this research
that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified.

If you have questions or want a copy or summary of the study results: Contact the researcher at the email address or phone number above. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records. If you have any questions about whether you have been treated in an illegal or unethical way, contact the University of Alabama Institutional Research Board at 205-348-8461.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions. I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older. I consent to take part in the research study of Mixed methods.